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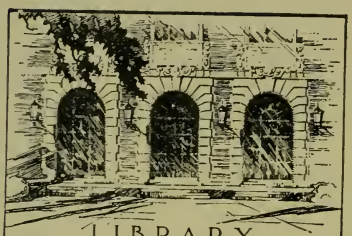

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THELMA.

THELMA.

A SOCIETY NOVEL.

BY

MARIE CORELLI,

AUTHOR OF

"A ROMANCE OF TWO WORLDS" AND "VENDETTA!"

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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BOOK I.

(*Continued.*)

THE LAND OF THE MIDNIGHT SUN.

THELMA.

CHAPTER XV.

"Why, sir, in the universal game of double-dealing, shall not the cleverest tricksters play each other false by haphazard, and so betray their closest secrets, to their own and their friends' infinite amazement?"—CONGREVE.

WHEN Olaf Güldmar and his daughter left the yacht that evening, Errington accompanied them, in order to have the satisfaction of escorting his beautiful betrothed as far as her own door. They were all three very silent—the *bonde* was pensive, Thelma shy, and Errington himself was too happy for speech. Arriving at the farmhouse, they saw Sigurd curled up under the porch, playing idly with the trailing rose-branches, but, on hearing their footsteps, he looked up, uttered a wild exclamation, and fled. Güldmar tapped his own forehead significantly.

"He grows worse and worse, the poor lad!" he said somewhat sorrowfully. "And yet there

is a strange mingling of foresight and wit with his wild fancies. Wouldst thou believe it, Thelma, child,"—and here he turned to his daughter and encircled her waist with his arm—"he seemed to know how matters were with thee and Philip, when I was yet in the dark concerning them!"

This was the first allusion her father had made to her engagement, and her head drooped with a sort of sweet shame.

"Nay, now, why hide thy face?" went on the old man cheerily. "Didst thou think I would grudge my bird her summer-time? Not I! And little did I hope for thee, my darling, that thou wouldst find a shelter worthy of thee in this wild world!" He paused a moment, looking tenderly down upon her, as she nestled in mute affection against his breast,—then addressing himself to Errington, he went on—

"We have a story in our Norse religion, my lad, of two lovers who declared their passion to each other on one stormy night in the depth of winter. They were together in a desolate hut on the mountains, and around them lay unbroken tracts of frozen snow. They were descended from the gods, and therefore the gods protected them—and it happened that after they had sworn their troth, the doors of the snow-bound hut flew suddenly open, and lo! the landscape had changed—the hills were gay with grass and flowers,—the sky was blue and brilliant, the birds

sang, and everywhere was heard the ripple of waters let loose from their icy fetters, and gambolling down the rocks in the joyous sun. This was the work of the goddess Friga,—the first kiss exchanged by the lovers she watched over, banished Winter from the land, and Spring came instead. 'Tis a pretty story, and true all the world over—true for all men and women of all creeds! It must be an ice-bound heart indeed that will not warm to the touch of love—and mine, though aged, grows young again in the joy of my children." He put his daughter gently from him towards Philip, saying with more gravity, "Go to him, child!—go—with thy old father's blessing! And take with thee the three best virtues of a wife,—truth, humility, and obedience. Good night, my son!" and he wrung Errington's hand with fervour. "You'll take longer to say good night to Thelma," and he laughed, "so I'll go in and leave you to it!"

And with a good-natured nod, he entered the house, whistling a tune as he went, that they might not think he imagined himself lonely or neglected,—and the two lovers paced slowly up and down the garden-path together, exchanging those first confidences which to outsiders seem so eminently foolish, but which to those immediately concerned are most wonderful, delightful, strange, and enchanting beyond all description. Where, from a practical point of view, is the sense of such questions as these—"When did you love me

first?" "What did you feel when I said so-and-so?" "Have you dreamt of me often?" "Will you love me always, always, always?" and so on *ad infinitum.* "Ridiculous rubbish!" exclaims the would-be strong-minded, but secretly savage old maid,—and the selfishly matter-of-fact, but privately fidgety and lonely old bachelor. Ah! but there are those who could tell you that at one time or another of their lives this "ridiculous rubbish" seemed far more important than the decline and fall of empires,—more necessary to existence than light and air,—more fraught with hope, fear, suspense, comfort, despair, and anxiety than anything that could be invented or imagined! Philip and Thelma,—man and woman in the full flush of youth, health, beauty, and happiness,—had just entered their Paradise,—their fairy-garden,—and every little flower and leaf on the way had special, sweet interest for them. Love's indefinable glories,—Love's proud possibilities,—Love's long ecstasies,—these, like so many spirit-figures, seemed to smile and beckon them on, on, on, through golden seas of sunlight,—through flower-filled fields of drowsy entrancement,—through winding ways of rose-strewn and lily-scented leafage,—on, on, with eyes and hearts absorbed in one another,—unseeing any end to the dreamlike wonders that, like some heavenly picture-scroll, unrolled slowly and radiantly before them. And so they murmured those unwise, tender things which no wisdom in

the world has ever surpassed, and when Philip at last said "Good night!" with more reluctance than Romeo, and pressed his parting kiss on his love's sweet, fresh mouth,—the riddle with which he had puzzled himself so often was resolved at last,—life *was* worth living, worth cherishing, worth ennobling. The reason of all things seemed clear to him,—Love, and Love only, supported, controlled, and grandly completed the universe! He accepted this answer to all perplexities,—his heart expanded with a sense of large content—his soul was satisfied.

Meanwhile, during his friend's absence from the yacht, Lorimer took it upon himself to break the news to Duprèz and Macfarlane. These latter young gentlemen had had their suspicions already, but they were not quite prepared to hear them so soon confirmed. Lorimer told the matter in his own way.

"I say, you fellows!" he remarked carelessly, as he sat smoking in their company on deck, "You'd better look out! If you stare at Miss Güldmar too much, you'll have Phil down upon you!"

"Ha, ha!" exclaimed Duprèz slyly, "the dear Phil-eep is in love?"

"Something more than that," said Lorimer, looking absently at the cigarette he held between his fingers,—"He's an engaged man."

"Engaged!" cried Macfarlane excitedly. "Ma

certes! He has the deevil's own luck! He's just secured for himself the grandest woman in the warld!"

"*Je le crois bien!*" said Duprèz gravely, nodding his head several times. "Phil-eep is a wise boy! He is the fortunate one! I am not for marriage at all—no! not for myself,—it is to tie one's hands, to become a prisoner,—and that would not suit me; but if I were inclined to captivity, I should like Mademoiselle Güldmar for my beautiful gaoler. And beautiful she is, *mon Dieu!* . . . beyond all comparison!"

Lorimer was silent, so was Macfarlane. After a pause, Duprèz spoke again.

"And do you know, *cher* Lorimer, when our Phil-eep will marry?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," returned Lorimer. "I know he's engaged, that's all."

Suddenly Macfarlane broke into a chuckling laugh.

"I say, Lorimer," he said, with his deep-set, small grey eyes sparkling with mischief. "'Twould be grand fun to see auld Dyceworthy's face when he hears o't. By the Lord! He'll fall to cursin' an' swearin' like ma pious aunt in Glasgie, or that auld witch that cursed Miss Thelma yestreen!"

"An eminently unpleasant old woman *she* was!" said Lorimer musingly. "I wonder what she meant by it!"

"She meant, *mon cher*," said Duprèz airily,

"that she knew herself to be ugly and venerable, while Mademoiselle was youthful and ravishing,—it is a sufficient reason to excite profanity in the mind of a lady!"

"Here comes Errington!" said Macfarlane, pointing to the approaching boat that was coming swiftly back from the Güldmars' pier. "Lorimer, are we to congratulate him?"

"If you like!" returned Lorimer. "I dare say he won't object."

So that as soon as Sir Philip set foot on the yacht, his hands were cordially grasped, and his friends outvied each other in good wishes for his happiness. He thanked them simply and with a manly straightforwardness, entirely free from the usual affected embarrassment that some modern young men think it seemly to adopt under similar circumstances.

"The fact is," he said frankly, "I congratulate myself,—I'm more lucky than I deserve, I know!"

"What a sensation she will make in London, Phil!" said Lorimer suddenly. "I've just thought of it! Good Heavens! Lady Winsleigh will cry for sheer spite and vexation!"

Philip laughed. "I hope not," he said. "I should think it would need immense force to draw a tear from her ladyship's cold bright eyes."

"She used to like you awfully, Phil!" said Lorimer. "You were a great favourite of hers."

"All men are her favourites with the exception of one—her husband!" observed Errington gaily. "Come along, let's have some champagne to celebrate the day! We'll propose toasts and drink healths—we've got a fair excuse for jollity this evening."

They all descended into the saloon, and had a merry time of it, singing songs and telling good stories, Lorimer being the gayest of the party, and it was long past midnight when they retired to their cabins, without even looking at the wonders of, perhaps, the most gorgeous sky that had yet shone on their travels—a sky of complete rose-colour, varying from the deepest shade up to the palest, in which the sun glowed with a subdued radiance like an enormous burning ruby.

Thelma saw it, standing under her house-porch, where her father had joined her,—Sigurd saw it,—he had come out from some thicket where he had been hiding, and he now sat, in a humble, crouching posture at Thelma's feet. All three were silent, reverently watching the spreading splendour of the heavens. Once Güldmar addressed his daughter in a soft tone.

"Thou art happy, my bird?"

She smiled—the expression of her face was almost divine in its rapture.

"Perfectly happy, my father!"

At the sound of her dulcet voice, Sigurd looked up. His large blue eyes were full of tears,

he took her hand and held it in his meagre and wasted one.

"Mistress!" he said suddenly, "do you think I shall soon die?"

She turned her pitying eyes down upon him, startled by the vibrating melancholy of his tone.

"Thou wilt die, Sigurd," answered Güldmar gently, "when the gods please,—not one second sooner or later. Art thou eager to see Valhalla?"

Sigurd nodded dreamily. "They will understand me there!" he murmured. "And I shall grow straight and strong and brave! Mistress, if you meet me in Valhalla, you will love me!"

She stroked his wild fair locks. "I love you now, Sigurd," she said tenderly. "But perhaps we shall all love each other better in heaven."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed Sigurd, patting her hand caressingly. "When we are all dead, dead! When our bodies crumble away and turn to flowers and birds and butterflies,—and our souls come out like white and red flames,—yes! . . . then we shall love each other and talk of such strange, strange things!" He paused and laughed wildly. Then his voice sank again into melancholy monotony—and he added: "Mistress, you are killing poor Sigurd!"

Thelma's face grew very earnest and anxious. "Are you vexed with me, dear?" she asked

soothingly. "Tell me what it is that troubles you?"

Sigurd met her eyes with a look of speechless despair and shook his head.

"I cannot tell you!" he muttered. "All my thoughts have gone to drown themselves one by one in the cold sea! My heart was buried yesterday, and I saw it sealed down into its coffin. There is something of me left,—something that dances before me like a flame,—but it will not rest, it does not obey me. I call it, but it will not come! And I am getting tired, mistress—very, very tired!" His voice broke, and a low sob escaped him,—he hid his face in the folds of her dress. Güldmar looked at the poor fellow compassionately.

"The wits wander further and further away!" he said to his daughter in a low tone. "'Tis a mind like a broken rainbow, split through by storm,—'twill soon vanish. Be patient with him, child,—it cannot be for long!"

"No, not for long!" cried Sigurd, raising his head brightly. "That is true—not for long! Mistress, will you come to-morrow with me and gather flowers? You used to love to wander with your poor boy in the fields,—but you have forgotten,—and I cannot find any blossoms without you! They will not show themselves unless you come! Will you? dear, beautiful mistress! will you come?"

She smiled, pleased to see him a little more cheerful. "Yes, Sigurd," she said; "I will come. We will go together early to-morrow morning and gather all the flowers we can find. Will that make you happy?"

"Yes!" he said, softly kissing the hem of her dress. "It will make me happy—for the last time."

Then he rose in an attitude of attention, as though he had been called by some one at a distance,—and with a grave, preoccupied air, he moved away, walking on tip-toe as though he feared to interrupt the sound of some soft invisible music. Güldmar sighed as he watched him disappear.

"May the gods make us thankful for a clear brain when we have it!" he said devoutly; then turning to his daughter, he bade her good night, and laid his hands on her golden head in silent but fervent blessing. "Child," he said tremulously, "in the new joys that await thee, never forget how thy old father loves thee!"

Then, not trusting himself to say more, he strode into the house and betook himself to slumber. Thelma followed his example, and the old farmhouse was soon wrapped in the peace and stillness of the strange night—a night of glittering sunshine. Sigurd alone was wakeful,—he lay at the foot of one of the tallest pine-trees, and stared persistently at the radiant sky through the network of dark branches. Now and then he smiled as though he saw some beatific vision—sometimes

he plucked fitfully at the soft long moss on which he had made his couch, and sometimes he broke into a low, crooning song. God alone knew the broken ideas, the dim fancies, the half-born desires, that glimmered like pale ghosts in the desert of his brain,—God alone, in the great Hereafter, could solve the problem of his sorrows and throw light on his soul's darkness.

It was past six in the morning when he arose, and smoothing back his tangled locks, went to Thelma's window and sat down beneath it, in mute expectancy. He had not long to wait,—at the expiration of ten or fifteen minutes, the little lattice was thrown wide open, and the girl's face, fresh as a rose, framed in a shower of amber locks, smiled down upon him.

"I am coming, Sigurd!" she cried softly and joyously. "How lovely the morning is! Stay for me there! I shall not be long."

And she disappeared, leaving her window open. Sigurd heard her singing little scraps of song to herself, as she moved about in the interior of her room. He listened, as though his soul were drawn out of him by her voice,—but presently the rich notes ceased, and there was a sudden silence. Sigurd knew or guessed the reason of that hush, —Thelma was at her prayers. Instinctively the poor forlorn lad folded his wasted hands—most piteously and most imploringly he raised his bewildered eyes to the blue and golden glory of the

sky. His conception of God was indefinable; his dreams of heaven, chaotic minglings of fairy-land with Valhalla,—but he somehow felt that wherever Thelma's holy aspirations turned, there the angels must be listening.

Presently she came out of the house, looking radiant as the morning itself,—her luxuriant hair was thrown back over her shoulders and fell loosely about her in thick curls, simply confined by a knot of blue ribbon. She carried a large osier basket, capacious, and gracefully shaped.

"Now, Sigurd," she called sweetly, "I am ready! Where shall we go?"

Sigurd hastened to her side, happy and smiling.

"Across there," he said, pointing towards the direction of Bosekop. "There is a stream under the trees that laughs to itself all day—you know it, mistress? And the poppies are in the field as you go—and by the banks there are the heart's-ease flowers—we cannot have too many of *them!* Shall we go?"

"Wherever you like, dear," answered Thelma tenderly, looking down from her stately height on the poor stunted creature at her side, who held her dress as though he were a child clinging to her as his sole means of guidance. "All the land is pleasant to-day."

They left the farm and its boundaries. A few men were at work on one of Güldmar's fields, and

these looked up,—half in awe, half in fear,—as Thelma and her fantastic servitor passed along.

"'Tis a fine wench!" said one man, resting on his spade, and following with his eyes the erect, graceful figure of his employer's daughter.

"Maybe, maybe!" said another gruffly; "but a fine wench is a snare of the devil! Do ye mind what Lovisa Elsland told us?"

"Ay, ay," answered the first speaker, "Lovisa knows,—Lovisa is the wisest woman we have in these parts—that's true! The girl's a witch, for sure!"

And they resumed their work in gloomy silence. Not one of them would have willingly laboured on Olaf Güldmar's land, had not the wages he offered been above the usual rate of hire,—and times were bad in Norway. But otherwise, the superstitious fear of him was so great that his fields might have gone untilled and his crops ungathered,—however, as matters stood, none of them could deny that he was a good paymaster, and just in his dealings with those whom he employed.

Thelma and Sigurd took their way in silence across a perfumed stretch of meadow-land,—the one naturally fertile spot in that somewhat barren district. Plenty of flowers blossomed at their feet, but they did not pause to gather these, for Sigurd was anxious to get to the stream where the purple pansies grew. They soon reached it—

it was a silvery clear ribbon of water that unrolled itself in bright folds, through green, transparent tunnels of fern and waving grass—leaping now and then with a swift dash over a smooth block of stone or jagged rock—but for the most part gliding softly, with a happy, self-satisfied murmur, as though it were some drowsy spirit dreaming joyous dreams. Here nodded the grave, purple-leaved pansies,—legendary consolers of the heart, —their little, quaint, expressive physiognomies turned in every direction; up to the sky, as though absorbing the sunlight,—down to the ground, with an almost severe air of meditation, or curled sideways on their stems in a sort of sly reflectiveness.

Sigurd was among them at once—they were his friends,—his playmates, his favourites,—and he gathered them quickly yet tenderly, murmuring as he did so, "Yes, you must all die; but death does not hurt; no! life hurts, but not death! See! as I pluck you, you all grow wings and fly away —away to other meadows, and bloom again." He paused, and a puzzled look came into his eyes. He turned towards Thelma, who had seated herself on a little knoll just above the stream, "Tell me, mistress," he said, "do the flowers go to heaven?"

She smiled. "I think so, dear Sigurd," she said; "I hope so! I am almost sure they do."

Sigurd nodded with an air of satisfaction.

"That is right," he observed. "It would never do to leave them behind, you know! They would be missed, and we should have to come down again and fetch them——" A crackling among the branches of some trees startled him,—he looked round, and uttered a peculiar cry like the cry of a wild animal, and exclaimed, "Spies, spies! ha, ha! secret, wicked faces that are afraid to show themselves! Come out! Mistress, mistress! make them come out!"

Thelma rose, surprised at his gesticulations, and came towards him; to her utter astonishment she found herself confronted by old Lovisa Elsland and the Reverend Mr. Dyceworthy's servant, Ulrika. On both women's faces there was a curious expression of mingled fear, triumph, and malevolence. Lovisa was the first to break silence.

"At last!" she croaked, in a sort of slow, monotonous tone. "At last, Thelma Güldmar, the Lord has delivered you into my hands!"

Thelma drew Sigurd close to her, and slipped one arm round him.

"Poor soul!" she said softly, with sweet pitying eyes fixed fearlessly on the old hag's withered, evil visage. "You must be tired, wandering about on the hills as you do! If you are her friend," she added, addressing Ulrika, "why do you not make her rest at home and keep warm? She is so old and feeble!"

"Feeble!" shrieked Lovisa; "Feeble!" And

she seemed choking with passion. "If I had my fingers at your throat, you should then see if I am feeble! I——" Ulrika pulled her by the arm, and whispered something which had the effect of calming her a little. "Well," she said, "you speak then! I can wait!"

Ulrika cleared her husky voice, and fixed her dull eyes on the girl's radiant countenance.

"You must go away," she said coldly and briefly. "You and your father, and this creature," and she pointed contemptuously to the staring Sigurd. "Do you understand? You must leave the Altenfjord! The people are tired of you—tired of bad harvests, ill-luck, sickness, and continued poverty. You are the cause of all our miseries,—and we have resolved you shall not stay among us. Go quickly,—take the blight and pestilence of your presence elsewhere! Go! or if you will not——"

"We shall burn, burn, burn, and utterly destroy!" interrupted Lovisa, with a sort of eldritch shriek. "The strong pine rafters of Olaf Güldmar's dwelling shall be kindled into flame to light the hills with crimson, far and near! Not a plank shall be spared!—not a vestige of his pride be left——"

"Stop!" said Thelma quietly. "What do you mean? You must both be very mad or very wicked! You want us to go away—you threaten to set fire to our home—why? We have done

you no harm. Tell me, poor soul!" and she turned with queenly forbearance to Lovisa, "is it for Britta's sake that you would burn the house she lives in? That is not wise! You cursed me the other day,—and why? What have I done that you should hate me?"

The old woman regarded her with steadfast, cruel eyes.

"You are your mother's child!" she said. "I hated her—I hate you! You are a witch!—the village knows it—Mr. Dyceworthy knows it! Mr. Dyceworthy says we shall be justified in the Lord's sight for wreaking evil upon you! Evil, evil be on those of evil deeds!"

"Then shall the evil fall on Mr. Dyceworthy," said the girl calmly. "He is wicked in himself, —and doubly wicked to encourage *you* in wickedness. He is ignorant and false—why do you believe in such a man?"

"He is a saint—a saint!" cried Lovisa wildly. "And shall the daughter of Satan withstand his power?" And she clapped her hands in a sort of fierce ecstasy.

Thelma glanced at her pityingly and smiled. "A saint! Poor thing, how little you know him!" she said. "And it is a pity you should hate me, for I have done you no wrong. I would do good to all if I knew how,—tell me can I comfort you, or make your life more cheerful? It must be hard to be so old and all alone!"

"Your death would comfort me!" returned Lovisa grimly. "Why do you keep Britta from me?"

"I do not keep her," Thelma answered. "She stays with me because she is happy. Why do you grudge her her happiness? And as for burning my father's house, surely you would not do so wicked and foolish a thing!—but still, you must do as you choose, for it is not possible that we shall leave the Altenfjord to please you."

Here Ulrika started forward angrily. "You defy us!" she cried. "You will not go?" And in her excitement she seized Thelma's arm roughly.

This action was too much for Sigurd; he considered it an attack on the person of his beloved mistress, and he resented it at once in his own fashion. Throwing himself on Ulrika with sudden ferocity, he pushed and beat her back as though he were a wolf-hound struggling with refractory prey; and though the ancient Lovisa rushed to the rescue, and Thelma imploringly called upon her zealous champion to desist,—all remonstrances were unavailing, till Sigurd had reduced his enemy to the most abject and whimpering terror.

"A demon—a demon!" she sobbed and moaned, as the valiant dwarf at last released her from his clutches; and, tossing his long, fair locks over his misshapen shoulders, laughed loudly and triumphantly with delight at his victory. "Lovisa! Lovisa Elsland! this is your doing; you brought

this upon me! I may die now, and you will not care! O Lord, Lord, have mercy——"

Suddenly she stopped; her eyes dilated,—her face grew grey with the sickening pallor of fear. Slowly she raised her hand and pointed to Sigurd—his fantastic dress had become disordered in the affray, and his jacket was torn open,—and on his bare chest a long red scar in the shape of a cross was distinctly visible. "That scar!" she muttered. "How did he get that scar?"

Lovisa stared at her in impatient derision. Thelma was too surprised to answer immediately, and Sigurd took it upon himself to furnish what he considered a crushing reply.

"Odin's mark!" he said, patting the scar with much elation. "No wonder you are afraid of it! Everybody knows it—birds, flowers, trees, and stars! Even you—you are afraid!"

And he laughed again, and snapped his fingers in her face. The woman shuddered violently. Step by step she drew near to the wondering Thelma, and spoke in low and trembling accents, without a trace of her former anger.

"They say you are wicked," she said slowly, "and that the devil has your soul already, before you are dead! But I am not afraid of you. No; I will forgive you, and pray for you, if you will tell me, . . ." She paused, and then continued, as with a strong effort. "Yes—tell me *who* is this Sigurd?"

"Sigurd is a foundling," answered Thelma simply. "He was floating about in the Fjord in a basket, and my father saved him. He was quite a baby. He had this scar on his chest then. He has lived with us ever since."

Ulrika looked at her searchingly,—then bent her head,—whether in gratitude or despair it was difficult to say.

"Lovisa Elsland," she said monotonously, "I am going home. I cannot help you any longer! I am tired—ill." Here she suddenly broke down, and, throwing up her arms with a wild gesture, she cried, "O God, God! O God!" and burst into a stormy passion of sobs and tears.

Thelma, touched by her utter misery, would have offered consolation, but Lovisa repelled her with a fierce gesture.

"Go!" said the old woman harshly. "You have cast your spells upon her—I am witness of your work! And shall you escape just punishment? No; not while there is a God in heaven, and I, Lovisa Elsland, live to perform His bidding! Go—white devil that you are!—go and carry misfortune upon misfortune to your fine gentleman-lover! Ah!" and she chuckled maliciously as the girl recoiled from her, her proud face growing suddenly paler, "have I touched you there? Lie in his breast, and it shall be as though a serpent stung him,—kiss his lips, and your touch shall be poison,—live in doubt,

and die in misery! Go! and may all evil follow you!"

She raised her staff and waved it majestically, as though she drew a circle in the air,—Thelma smiled pityingly, but deigned no answer to her wild ravings.

"Come, Sigurd!" she said simply, "let us return home. It is growing late—father will wonder where we are."

"Yes, yes," agreed Sigurd, seizing the basket full of the pansies he had plucked. "The sunshine is slipping away, and we cannot live with shadows! These are not real women, mistress; they are dreams—black dreams,—I have often fought with dreams, and I know how to make them afraid! See how the one weeps because she knows me,—and the other is just going to fall into a grave. I can hear the clods thrown on her head—thump—thump! It does not take long to bury a dream! Come, mistress, let us follow the sunshine!"

And, taking the hand she extended towards him, he turned away, looking back once, however, to call out loudly—

"Good-bye, bad dreams!"

As they disappeared behind the trees, Lovisa turned angrily to the still-sobbing Ulrika.

"What is this folly?" she exclaimed, striking her staff fiercely into the ground. "Art mad or bewitched?"

Ulrika looked up,—her plain face swollen and stained with weeping.

"O Lord, have mercy upon me! O Lord, forgive me!" she moaned. "I did not know it—how *could* I know?"

Lovisa grew so impatient that she seized her by the shoulder and shook her violently.

"Know what?" she cried; "know what?"

"Sigurd is my son!" said Ulrika, with a sort of solemn resignation,—then, with a sudden gesture, she threw her hands above her head, crying, "My son, my son! The child I thought I had killed! The Lord be praised I did not murder him!"

Lovisa Elsland seemed stupefied with surprise. "Is this the truth?" she asked at last, slowly and incredulously.

"The truth, the truth!" cried Ulrika passionately. "It is always the truth that comes to light! He is my child, I tell you! . . . I gave him that scar!" She paused, shuddering, and continued in a lower tone, "I tried to kill him with a knife, but when the blood flowed, it sickened me, and I could not! He was an infant abortion—the evil fruit of an evil deed—and I threw him out to the waves,—as I told you, long ago. You have had good use of my confession, Lovisa Elsland; you have held me in your power by means of my secret, but now——"

The old woman interrupted her with a low laugh of contempt and malice.

"As the parents are, so are the children!" she said scornfully. "Your lover must have been a fine man, Ulrika, if the son is like his father!"

Ulrika glared at her vengefully, then drew herself up with an air of defiance.

"I care nothing for your taunts, Lovisa Elsland!" she said. "You can do me no harm! All is over between us! I will help in no mischief against the Güldmars. Whatever their faults, they saved—my child!"

"Is that so great a blessing?" asked Lovisa ironically.

"It makes your threats useless," answered Ulrika. "You cannot call me *murderess* again!"

"Coward and fool!" shrieked Lovisa. "Was it *your* intent that the child should live? Were you not glad to think it dead? And cannot I spread the story of your infamy through all the villages where you are known? Is not the wretched boy himself a living witness of the attempt you made to kill him? Does not that scar speak against you? Would not Olaf Güldmar relate the story of the child's rescue to any one that asked him? Would you like all Bosekop to know of your intrigue with an escaped criminal, who was afterwards caught and hung! The virtuous Ulrika—the zealous servant of the Gospel—the pious, praying Ulrika!" and the old woman trembled with rage and excitement. "Out of my

power? Never, never! As long as there is breath in my body I will hold you down! *Not* a murderess, you say——?"

"No," said Ulrika very calmly, with a keen look, "I am *not*—but you *are!*"

CHAPTER XVI.

"Il n'y a personne qui ait eu autant à souffrir à votre sujet que moi depuis ma naissance! aussi je vous supplie à deux genoux et au nom de Dieu, d'avoir pitié de moi!"—*Old Breton Ballad.*

In a few more days Thelma's engagement to Sir Philip Bruce-Errington was the talk of the neighbourhood. The news spread gradually, having been, in the first place, started by Britta, whose triumph in her mistress's happiness, was charming to witness. It reached the astonished and reluctant ears of the Reverend Mr. Dyceworthy, whose rage was so great that it destroyed his appetite for twenty-four hours. But the general impression in the neighbourhood, where superstition maintained so strong a hold on the primitive and prejudiced minds of the people, was that the reckless young Englishman would rue the day on which he wedded "the white witch of the Altenfjord."

Güldmar was regarded with more suspicion than ever, as having used some secret and dia-

bolical influence to promote the match; and the whole party were, as it seemed, tabooed, and looked upon as given up to the most unholy practices.

Needless to say, the opinions of the villagers had no effect whatever on the good spirits of those who were thus unfavourably criticized, and it would have been difficult to find a merrier group than that assembled one fine morning in front of Güldmar's house, all equipped from top to toe for some evidently unusually lengthy and arduous mountain excursion. Each man carried a long, stout stick, portable flask, knapsack, and rug—the latter two articles strapped together and slung across the shoulder—and they all presented an eminently picturesque appearance, particularly Sigurd, who stood at a little distance from the others, leaning on his tall staff and gazing at Thelma with an air of peculiar pensiveness and abstraction.

She was at that moment busied in adjusting Errington's knapsack more comfortably, her fair, laughing face turned up to his, and her bright eyes alight with love and tender solicitude.

"I've a good mind not to go at all," he whispered in her ear. "I'll come back and stay with you all day."

"You foolish boy!" she answered merrily. "You would miss seeing the grand fall—all for what? To sit with me and watch me spinning,

and you would grow so very sleepy! Now, if I were a man, I would go with you."

"I'm very glad you're not a man!" said Errington, pressing the little hand that had just buckled his shoulder-strap. "Though I wish you *were* going with us. But I say, Thelma, darling, won't you be lonely?"

She laughed gaily. "Lonely? I! Why, Britta is with me—besides, I am never lonely *now*." She uttered the last word softly, with a shy, upward glance. "I have so much to think about——" She paused and drew her hand away from her lover's close clasp. "Ah," she resumed, with a mischievous smile, "you are a conceited boy! You want to be missed! You wish me to say that I shall feel most miserable all the time you are away! If I do, I shall not tell you!"

"Thelma, child!" called Olaf Güldmar, at this juncture, "keep the gates bolted and doors barred while we are absent. Remember, thou and Britta must pass the night alone here,—we cannot be at home till late in the evening of to-morrow. Let no one inside the garden, and deny thyself to all comers. Dost thou hear?"

"Yes, father," she responded meekly.

"And let Britta keep good guard that her crazy hag of a grandam come not hither to disturb or fright thee with her croaking,—for thou hast not even Sigurd to protect thee."

"Not even Sigurd!" said that personage, with

a meditative smile. "No, mistress; not even poor Sigurd!"

"One of us might remain behind," suggested Lorimer, with a side-look at his friend.

"Oh no, no!" exclaimed Thelma anxiously. "It would vex me so much! Britta and I have often been alone before. We are quite safe, are we not, father?"

"Safe enough!" said the old man, with a laugh. "I know of no one save Lovisa Elsland who has the courage to face thee, child! Still, pretty witch as thou art, 'twill not harm thee to put the iron bar across the house door, and to lock fast the outer gate when we have gone. This done, I have no fear of thy safety. Now," and he kissed his daughter heartily, "now lads, 'tis time we were on the march! Sigurd, my boy, lead on!"

"Wait!" cried Sigurd, springing to Thelma's side. "I must say good-bye!" And he caught the girl's hand and kissed it,—then plucking a rose, he left it between her fingers. "That will remind you of Sigurd, mistress! Think of him once to-day!—once again when the midnight glory shines. Good-bye, mistress! that is what the dead say, . . . Good-bye!"

And with a passionate gesture of farewell, he ran and placed himself at the head of the little group that waited for him, saying exultingly—

"Now follow me! Sigurd knows the way!

Sigurd is the friend of all the wild waterfalls! Up the hills,—across the leaping stream,—through the sparkling foam!" And he began chanting to himself a sort of wild mountain song.

Macfarlane looked at him dubiously. "Are ye sure?" he said to Güldmar. "Are ye sure that wee chap kens whaur he's gaun? He'll no lead us into a ditch an' leave us there, mistakin' it for the Fall?"

Güldmar laughed heartily. "Never fear! Sigurd's the best guide you can have, in spite of his fancies. He knows all the safest and surest paths; and Njedegorze is no easy place to reach, I can tell you!"

"*Pardon!* How is it called?" asked Duprèz eagerly.

"Njedegorze."

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders. "I give it up!" he said smilingly. "Mademoiselle Güldmar, if anything happens to me at this cascade with the name unpronounceable, you will again be my doctor, will you not?"

Thelma laughed as she shook hands with him. "Nothing will happen," she rejoined; "unless, indeed, you catch cold by sleeping in a hut all night. Father, you must see that they do not catch cold!"

The *bonde* nodded, and motioned the party forward, Sigurd leading the way,—Errington, however, lingered behind on pretence of having

forgotten something, and, drawing his betrothed in his arms, kissed her fondly.

"Take care of yourself, darling!" he murmured, —and then hurrying away he rejoined his friends, who had discreetly refrained from looking back, and therefore had not seen the lovers embrace.

Sigurd, however, had seen it, and the sight apparently gave fresh impetus to his movements, for he sprang up the adjacent hill with so much velocity that those who followed had some difficulty to keep up with him,—and it was not till they were out of sight of the farmhouse that he resumed anything like a reasonable pace.

As soon as they had disappeared, Thelma turned into the house and seated herself at her spinning-wheel. Britta soon entered the room, carrying the same graceful implement of industry, and the two maidens sat together for some time in a silence unbroken, save by the low melodious whirring of the two wheels, and the mellow complaints of the strutting doves on the window-sill.

"Fröken Thelma!" said Britta at last, timidly.

"Yes, Britta?" And her mistress looked up inquiringly.

"Of what use is it for you to spin now?" queried the little handmaid. "You will be a great lady, and great ladies do not work at all!"

Thelma's wheel revolved more and more slowly, till at last it stopped altogether.

"Do they not?" she said half inquiringly and musingly. "I think you must be wrong, Britta. It is impossible that there should be people who are always idle. I do not know what great ladies are like."

"I do!" And Britta nodded her curly head sagaciously. "There was a girl from Hammerfest who went to Christiania to seek service—she was handy at her needle, and a fine spinner, and a great lady took her right away from Norway to London. And the lady bought her spinning-wheel for a curiosity she said,—and put it in the corner of a large parlour, and used to show it to her friends, and they would all laugh and say, 'How pretty!' And Jansĕna,—that was the girl—never span again—she wore linen that she got from the shops,—and it was always falling into holes, and Jansĕna was always mending, mending, and it was no good!"

Thelma laughed. "Then it is better to spin, after all, Britta—is it not?"

Britta looked dubious. "I do not know," she answered; "but I am sure great ladies do not spin. Because, as I said to you, Fröken, this Jansĕna's mistress was a great lady, and she never did anything,—no! nothing at all,—but she put on wonderful dresses, and sat in her room, or was driven about in a carriage. And that is what you will do also, Fröken!"

"Oh no, Britta," said Thelma decisively. "I

could not be so idle. Is it not fortunate I have so much linen ready? I have quite enough for marriage."

The little maid looked wistful. "Yes, dear Fröken," she murmured hesitatingly; "but I was thinking if it is right for you to wear what you have spun. Because, you see, Jansĕna's mistress had wonderful things all trimmed with lace,—and they would all come back from the washing torn and hanging in threads, and Jansĕna had to mend those as well as her own clothes. You see, they do not last at all—and they cost a large sum of money; but it is proper for great ladies to wear them."

"I am not sure of that, Britta," said Thelma, still musingly. "But still, it may be—my bridal things may not please Philip. If you know anything about it, you must tell me what is right."

Britta was in a little perplexity. She had gathered some idea from her friend Jansĕna concerning life in London,—she had even a misty notion of what was meant by a "trousseau" with all its dainty, expensive, and often useless fripperies; but she did not know how to explain herself to her young mistress, whose simple, almost severe tastes would, she instinctively felt, recoil from anything like ostentation in dress, so she was discreetly silent.

"You know, Britta," continued Thelma gently. "I shall be Philip's wife, and I must not vex him

in any little thing. But I do not quite understand. I have always dressed in the same way,—and he has never said that he thought me wrongly clothed."

And she looked down with quite a touching pathos at her straight, white woollen gown, and smoothed its folds doubtfully. The impulsive Britta sprang to her side and kissed her with girlish and unaffected enthusiasm.

"My dear, my dear! You are more lovely and sweet than anybody in the world!" she cried. "And I am sure Sir Philip thinks so too!"

A beautiful roseate flush suffused Thelma's cheeks, and she smiled.

"Yes, I know he does!" she replied softly. "And, after all, it does not matter what one wears."

Britta was meditating,—she looked lovingly at her mistress's rippling wealth of hair.

"Diamonds!" she murmured to herself in a sort of satisfied soliloquy. "Diamonds, like those you have on your finger, Fröken,—diamonds all scattered among your curls like dewdrops! And white satin, all shining, shining!—people would take you for an angel!"

Thelma laughed merrily. "Britta, Britta! You are talking such nonsense! Nobody dresses so grandly except queens in fairy-tales."

"Do they not?" and the wise Britta looked more profound than ever. "Well, we shall see, dear Fröken—we shall see!"

"*We?*" queried Thelma with surprised emphasis.

Her little maid blushed vividly, and looked down demurely, twisting and untwisting the string of her apron.

"Yes, Fröken," she said in a low tone. "I have asked Sir Philip to let me go with you when you leave Norway."

"Britta!" Thelma's astonishment was too great for more than this exclamation.

"Oh, my dear! don't be angry with me!" implored Britta, with sparkling eyes, rosy cheeks, and excited tongue all pleading eloquently together, "I should die here without you! I told the *bonde* so; I did, indeed! And then I went to Sir Philip—he is such a grand gentleman,—so proud and yet so kind,—and I asked him to let me still be your servant. I said I knew all great ladies had a maid, and if I was not clever enough I could learn, and—and—" here Britta began to sob, "I said I did not want any wages—only to live in a little corner of the same house where you were,—to sew for you, and see you, and hear your voice sometimes——" Here the poor little maiden broke down altogether and hid her face in her apron crying bitterly.

The tears were in Thelma's eyes too, and she hastened to put her arm round Britta's waist, and tried to soothe her by every loving word she could think of.

"Hush, Britta dear! you must not cry!" she said tenderly, "What did Philip say?"

"He said," jerked out Britta convulsively,

"that I was a g-good little g-girl, and that he was g-glad I wanted to g-go!" Here her two sparkling wet eyes peeped out of the apron inquiringly, and seeing nothing but the sweetest affection on Thelma's attentive face, she went on more steadily. "He p-pinched my cheek, and he laughed—and he said he would rather have me for your maid than anybody—there!"

And this last exclamation was uttered with so much defiance that she dashed away the apron altogether, and stood erect in self-congratulatory glory, with a particularly red little nose and very trembling lips. Thelma smiled, and caressed the tumbled brown curls.

"I am very glad, Britta!" she said earnestly. "Nothing could have pleased me more! I must thank Philip. But it is of father I am thinking—what will father and Sigurd do?"

"Oh, that is all settled, Fröken," said Britta, recovering herself rapidly from her outburst. "The *bonde* means to go for one of his long voyages in the *Valkyrie*—it is time she was used again, I'm sure,—and Sigurd will go with him. It will do them both good—and the tongues of Bosekop can waggle as much as they please, none of us will be here to mind them!"

"And you will escape your grandmother!" said Thelma amusedly, as she once more set her spinning-wheel in motion.

Britta laughed delightedly. "Yes! she will

not find her way to England without some trouble!" she exclaimed. "Oh, how happy I shall be! And you"—she looked pleadingly at her mistress—"you do not dislike me for your servant?"

"Dislike!" and Thelma gave her a glance of mingled reproach and tenderness. "You know how fond I am of you, Britta! It will be like having a little bit of my old home always with me."

Silently Britta kissed her hand, and then resumed her work. The monotonous murmur of the two wheels recommenced,—this time pleasantly accompanied by the rippling chatter of the two girls who, after the fashion of girls all the world over, indulged in many speculations as to the new and strange life that lay before them.

Their ideas were of the most primitive character,—Britta had never been out of Norway, and Thelma's experiences, apart from her home life, extended merely to the narrow and restricted bounds of simple and severe convent discipline, where she had been taught that the pomps and vanities of the world were foolish and transient shows, and that nothing could please God more than purity and rectitude of soul. Her character was formed, and set upon a firm basis—firmer than she herself was conscious of. The nuns who had been entrusted with her education had fulfilled their task with more than their customary zeal—they were interested in the beautiful Norwegian

child for the sake of her mother, who had also been their charge. One venerable nun in particular had bestowed a deep and lasting benefit on her, for, seeing her extraordinary beauty, and forestalling the dangers and temptations into which the possession of such exceptional charms might lead her, she adopted a wise preventive course, that cased her as it were in armour, proof against all the assailments of flattery. She told the girl quite plainly that she was beautiful,—but at the same time made her aware that beauty was common,—that she shared it alike with birds, flowers, trees, and all the wonderful objects of nature—moreover, that it was nothing to boast of, being so perishable.

"Suppose a rose foolish enough to boast of its pretty leaves," said the gentle *religieuse* on one occasion. "They all fall to the ground in a short time, and become decayed and yellow—it is only the fragrance, or the *soul* of the rose that lasts." Such precepts, that might have been wasted on a less sensitive and thoughtful nature, sank deeply into Thelma's mind—she accepted them not only in theory but in practice, and the result was that she accepted her beauty as she accepted her health,—as a mere natural occurrence—no more. She was taught that the three principal virtues of a woman were chastity, humility, and obedience,—these were the laws of God, fixed and immutable, which no one dared break without

committing grievous and unpardonable sin. So she thought, and according to her thoughts she lived. What a strange world, then, lay before her in the contemplated change that was about to take place in the even tenor of her existence! A world of intrigue and folly—a world of infidelity and falsehood!—how would she meet it? It was a question she never asked herself—she thought London a sort of magnified Christiania, or at best, the Provençal town of Arles on a larger scale. She had heard her father speak of it, but only in a vague way, and she had been able to form no just idea even to herself of the enormous metropolis crowded to excess with its glad and sorrowful, busy and idle, rich and poor millions. England itself floated before her fancy as a green, fertile, embowered island where Shakespeare had lived—and it delighted her to know that her future home, Errington Manor, was situated in Warwickshire, Shakespeare's county. Of the society that awaited her, she had no notion,—she was prepared to "keep house" for her husband in a very simple way—to spin his household linen, to spare him all trouble and expense, and to devote herself body and soul to his service. As may be well imagined, the pictures she drew of her future married life, as she sat and span with Britta on that peaceful afternoon, were widely different to the destined reality that every day approached her more nearly.

Meantime, while the two girls were at home and undisturbed in the quiet farmhouse, the mountaineering party, headed by Sigurd, were well on their way towards the great Fall of Njedegorze. They had made a toilsome ascent of the hills by the side of the Alten river—they had climbed over craggy boulders and slippery rocks, sometimes wading knee-deep in the stream, or pausing to rest and watch the salmon leap and turn glittering somersaults in the air close above the diamond-clear water,—and they had beguiled their fatigue with songs and laughter and the telling of fantastic legends and stories in which Sigurd had shone at his best—indeed, this unhappy being was in a singularly clear and rational frame of mind, disposed, too, to be agreeable even towards Errington. Lorimer, who for reasons of his own, had kept a close watch on Sigurd ever since his friend's engagement to Thelma, was surprised and gratified at this change in his former behaviour, and encouraged him in it, while Errington himself responded to the dwarf's proffered friendship, and walked beside him, chatting cheerfully, during the most part of the excursion to the Fall. It was a long and exceedingly difficult journey—and in some parts dangerous—but Sigurd proved himself worthy of the commendations bestowed on him by the *bonde*, and guided them by the easiest and most secure paths, till at last, about seven o'clock in the evening, they

heard the rush and roar of the rapids below the Fall, and with half an hour's more exertion, came in sight of them, though not as yet of the Fall itself. Yet the rapids were grand enough to merit attention—and the whole party stopped to gaze on the whirling wonder of waters that, hissing furiously, circled round and round giddily in wheels of white foam, and then, as though enraged, leaped high over obstructing stones and branches, and rushed onward and downward to the smoother length of the river.

The noise was deafening,—they could not hear each other speak unless by shouting at the top of their voices, and even then the sounds were rendered almost indistinct by the riotous uproar. Sigurd, however, who knew all the ins and outs of the place, sprang lightly on a jutting crag, and, putting both hands to his mouth, uttered a peculiar, shrill, and far-reaching cry. Clear above the turmoil of the restless waters, that cry was echoed back eight distinct times from the surrounding rocks and hills. Sigurd laughed triumphantly.

"You see!" he exclaimed, as he resumed his leadership of the party, "they all know me! They are obliged to answer me when I call—they dare not disobey!" And his blue eyes flashed with that sudden wild fire that generally foretold some access of his particular mania.

Errington saw this and said soothingly, "Of course not, Sigurd! No one would dream of dis-

obeying you! See how we follow you to-day—we all do exactly what you tell us."

"We are sheep, Sigurd," added Lorimer lazily; "and you are the shepherd!"

Sigurd looked from one to the other half doubtingly, half cunningly. He smiled.

"Yes!" he said. "You will follow me, will you not? Up to the very top of the Fall?"

"By all means!" answered Sir Philip gaily. "Anywhere you choose to go!"

Sigurd seemed satisfied, and lapsing into the calm, composed manner which had distinguished him all day, he led the way as before, and they resumed their march, this time in silence, for conversation was well-nigh impossible. The nearer they came to the yet invisible Fall, the more thunderous grew the din—it was as though they approached some vast battle-field where opposing armies were in full action, with all the tumult of cannonade and musketry. The ascent grew steeper and more difficult—at times the high barriers of rock seemed almost impassable,—often they were compelled to climb over confused heaps of huge stones through which the eddying water pushed its way with speed and fury,—but Sigurd's precision was never at fault,—he leaped crag after crag swiftly and skilfully, always lighting on a sure foothold, and guiding the others to do the same. At last, at a sharp turn of one of these rocky eminences, they perceived an enormous

cloud of white vapour rising up like smoke from the earth, and twisting itself as it rose, in swaying, serpentine folds, as though some giant spirit-hand were shaking it to and fro like a long flowing veil in the air. Sigurd paused and pointed forward.

"Njedegorze!" he cried.

They all pressed on with some excitement. The ground vibrated beneath their feet with the shock of the falling torrent, and the clash and uproar of the disputing waters rolled in their ears like the grand, sustained bass of some huge cathedral organ. Almost blinded by the spray that dashed its disdainful drops in their faces, deafened by the majestic, loud, and ceaseless eloquence that poured its persuasive [force into the splitting hearts of the rocks around them,—breathless with climbing, and well-nigh tired out, they struggled on, and broke into one unanimous shout of delight and triumph when they at last reached the small hut that had been erected for the convenience of travellers who might choose that way to journey to the Altenfjord,—and stood face to face with the magnificent cascade, one of the grandest in Norway. What a sublime spectacle it was!—that tempest of water sweeping sheer down the towering rocks in one straight, broad, unbroken sheet of foam! A myriad rainbows flashed in the torrent and vanished, to reappear again instantly with redoubled lustre,—while the glory of the evening sunlight glittering

on one side of the fall made it gleam like a sparkling shower of molten gold.

"Njedegorze!" cried Sigurd again, giving a singularly musical pronunciation to the apparently uncouth name. "Come! still a little further,—to the top of the fall!"

Olaf Güldmar, however, paid no attention to this invitation. He was already beginning to busy himself with preparations for passing the night comfortably in the hut before mentioned. Stout old Norseman as he was, there were limits to his endurance, and the arduous exertions of the long day had brought fatigue to him as well as to the rest of the party.

Macfarlane was particularly exhausted. His frequent pulls at the whiskey flask had been of little or no avail as a support to his aching limbs, and, now he had reached his destination, he threw himself full length on the turf in front of the hut and groaned most dismally.

Lorimer surveyed him amusedly, and stood beside him, the very picture of a cool young Briton whom nothing could possibly discompose.

"Done up—eh, Sandy?" he inquired.

"Done up!" growled Macfarlane. "D'ye think I'm a Norseman or a jumping Frenchy?" This with a look of positive indignation at the lively Duprèz, who, if tired, was probably too vain to admit it, for he was strutting about, giving vent to his genuine admiration of the

scene before him with the utmost freshness and enthusiasm. "I'm just a plain Scotchman, an' no such a fule at climbin' either! Why, man, I've been up Goatfell in Arran, an' Ben Lomond an' Ben Nevis—there's a mountain for ye, if ye like! But a brae like this, wi' a' the stanes lyin' helter-skelter, an' crags that ye can barely hold on to—and a mad chap guidin' ye on at the speed o' a leapin' goat—I tell ye, I havena been used to't." Here he drew out his flask and took another extensive pull at it. Then he added suddenly, "Just look at Errington! He'll be in a fair way to break his neck if he follows yon wee crazy loon any further."

At these words Lorimer turned sharply round, and perceived his friend following Sigurd step by step up a narrow footing in the steep ascent of some rough, irregular crags that ran out and formed a narrow ledge, ending in a sharp point jutting directly over the full fury of the waterfall. He watched the two climbing figures for an instant without any anxiety,—then he suddenly remembered that Philip had promised to go with Sigurd "to the top of the fall." Acting on a rapid impulse which he did not stop to explain to himself, Lorimer at once started off after them,—but the ascent was difficult; they were some distance ahead, and though he shouted vociferously, the roar of the cascade rendered his voice inaudible. Gaining on them, however, by slow

degrees, he was startled when all at once they disappeared at the summit—and, breathless with his rapid climb, he paused, bewildered. By-and-by he saw Sigurd creeping cautiously out along the rocky shelf that overhung the tumbling torrent—his gaze grew riveted with a sort of deadly fascination on the spot.

"Good God!" he muttered under his breath. "Surely Phil will not follow him *there!*"

He watched with strained eyes, — and a smothered cry escaped him as Errington's tall figure, erect and bold, appeared on that narrow and dangerous platform! He never knew how he clambered up the rest of the slippery ascent. A double energy seemed given to his active limbs. He never paused again for one second till he also stood on the platform, without being heard or perceived by either Sigurd or Philip. Their backs were turned to him, and he feared to move or speak, lest a sudden surprised movement on their parts should have the fatal result of precipitating one or both into the fall. He remained, therefore, behind them, silent and motionless,—looking, as they looked, at the terrific scene below. From that point, Njedegorze was as a huge boiling caldron, from which arose twisted wreaths and coiling lengths of white vapour, faintly coloured with gold and silvery blue. Dispersing in air, these mists took all manner of fantastic forms,—ghostly arms seemed to wave and beckon, ghostly hands

to unite in prayer,—and fluttering creatures in gossamer draperies of green and crimson appeared to rise and float and retire and shrink to nothingness again in the rainbow drift and sweep of whirling foam. Errington gazed unconcernedly down on the seething abyss. He pushed back his cap from his brow, and let the fresh wind play among his dark, clustering curls. His nerves were steady, and he surveyed the giddily twisting wheels of shining water without any corresponding giddiness in his own brain. He had that sincere delight in a sublime natural spectacle which is the heritage of all who possess a poetic and artistic temperament; and though he stood on a frail ledge of rock, from which one false or unwary step might send him to certain destruction, he had not the slightest sense of possible danger in his position. Withdrawing his eyes from the Fall, he looked kindly down at Sigurd, who in turn was staring up at him with a wild fixity of regard.

"Well, old boy," he said cheerfully, "this is a fine sight! Have you had enough of it? Shall we go back?"

Sigurd drew imperceptibly nearer. Lorimer, from his point of vantage behind a huge boulder, drew nearer also.

"Go back?" echoed Sigurd. "Why should we go back?"

"Why, indeed!" laughed Errington, lightly balancing himself on the trembling rocks beneath

him. "Except that I should scarcely think this is the best place on which to pass the night! Not enough room, and too much noise! What say you?"

"Oh, brave, brave fool!" cried the dwarf in sudden excitement. "Are you not *afraid?*"

The young baronet's keen eyes glanced him over with amused wonder.

"What of?" he demanded coolly. Still nearer came Sigurd—nearer also came the watchful, though almost invisible Lorimer.

"Look down there!" continued Sigurd in shrill tones, pointing to the foaming gulf. "Look at the *Elf-danz*—see the beautiful spirits with the long pale green hair and glittering wings! See how they beckon, beckon, beckon! They want some one to join them—look how their white arms wave,—they throw back their golden veils and smile at us! They call to *you*—you with the strong figure and the proud eyes—why do you not go to them? They will kiss and caress you—they have sweet lips and snow-white bosoms,—they will love you and take care of you—they are as fair as Thelma!"

"Are they? I doubt it!" and Errington smiled dreamily as he turned his head again towards the fleecy whirl of white water, and saw at once with an artist's quick eye what his sick-brained companion meant by the *Elf-danz*, in the fantastic twisting, gliding shapes tossed up in the vaporous

mist of the Fall. "But I'll take your word, Sigurd, without making the elves' personal acquaintance! Come along—this place is bad for you—we'll dance with the green-haired nymphs another time."

And with a light laugh he was about to turn away, when he was surprised by a sudden, strange convulsion of Sigurd's countenance—his blue eyes flashed with an almost phosphorescent lustre,—his pale skin flushed darkly red, and the veins in his forehead started into swelled and knotted prominence.

"Another time!" he screamed loudly; "no, no! Now—now! Die, robber of Thelma's love! Die—die—*die!*"

Repeating these words like quick gasps of fury, he twisted his meagre arms tightly round Errington, and thrust him fiercely with all his might towards the edge of the Fall. For one second Philip strove against him—the next, he closed his eyes—Thelma's face smiled on his mind in that darkness as though in white farewell—the surging blood roared in his ears with more thunder than the terrific tumble of the torrent—"God!" he muttered, and *then*—then he stood safe on the upper part of the rocky platform with Lorimer's strong hand holding him in a vice-like grasp, and Lorimer's face, pale, but looking cheerfully into his. For a moment he was too bewildered to speak. His friend loosened him and laughed

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rather forcedly—a slight tremble of his lips was observable under his fair moustache.

"By Jove, Phil," he remarked in his usual nonchalant manner, "that was rather a narrow shave! Fortunate I happened to be there!"

Errington gazed about him confusedly. "Where's Sigurd?" he asked.

"Gone! Ran off like a 'leapin' goat,' as Sandy elegantly describes him. I thought at first he meant to jump over the Fall, in which case I should have been compelled to let him have his own way, as my hands were full. But he's taken a safe landward direction."

"Didn't he try to push me over?"

"Exactly! He was quite convinced that the mermaids wanted you. But I considered that Miss Thelma's wishes had a prior claim on my regard."

"Look here, old man," said Errington suddenly, "don't jest about it! You saved my life!"

"Well!" and Lorimer laughed. "Quite by accident, I assure you."

"*Not* by accident!" and Philip flushed up, looking very handsome and earnest. "I believe you followed us up here thinking something might happen. Now didn't you?"

"Suppose I did," began Lorimer, but he was interrupted by his friend, who seized his hand, and pressed it with a warm, close, affectionate fervour. Their eyes met—and Lorimer blushed as though he had performed some action meriting blame

rather than gratitude. "That'll do, old fellow," he said almost nervously. "As we say in polite society when some one crushes our favourite corn under his heel—don't mention it! You see Sigurd *is* cracked,—there's not the slightest doubt about that,—and he's hardly accountable for his vagaries. Then I know something about him that perhaps you don't. He loves your Thelma!"

They were making the descent of the rocks together, and Errington stopped short in surprise.

"Loves Thelma! You mean as a brother——"

"Oh no, I don't! I mean that he loves her as brothers often love other people's sisters—his affection is by no means fraternal—if it were only *that*——"

"I see!" and Philip's eyes filled with a look of grave compassion. "Poor fellow! I understand his hatred of me now. Good Heavens! how he must suffer! I forgive him with all my heart. But—I say, Thelma has no idea of this!"

"Of course not. And you'd better not tell her. What's the good of making her unhappy?"

"But how did *you* learn it?" inquired Philip, with a look of some curiosity at his friend.

"Oh, I!" and Lorimer laughed carelessly; "I was always an observing sort of fellow—fond of putting two and two together and making four of them, when I wasn't too exhausted and the weather wasn't too hot for the process. Sigurd's rather

attached to me—indulges me with some specially private ravings now and then—I soon found out his secret, though I believe the poor little chap doesn't understand his own feelings himself."

"Well," said Errington thoughtfully, "under the circumstances you'd better not mention this affair of the Fall to Güldmar. It will only vex him. Sigurd won't try such a prank again."

"I'm not so sure of that," replied Lorimer; "but you know enough now to be on your guard with him." He paused and looked up with a misty softness in his frank blue eyes—then went on in a subdued tone—"When I saw you on the edge of that frightful chasm, Phil—— " He broke off as if the recollection were too painful, and exclaimed suddenly—"Good God! if I had lost you!"

Errington clapped one hand on his shoulder.

"Well! What if you had?" he asked almost mirthfully, though there was a suspicious tremble in his ringing voice.

"I should have said with Horatio, 'I am more an antique Roman than a Dane,'—and gone after you," laughed Lorimer. "And who knows what a jolly banquet we might not have been enjoying in the next world by this time? If I believe in anything at all, I believe in a really agreeable heaven—nectar and ambrosia, and all that sort of thing, and Hebes to wait upon you."

As he spoke they reached the sheltering hut,

where Güldmar, Duprèz, and Macfarlane were waiting rather impatiently for them.

"Where's Sigurd?" cried the *bonde.*

"Gone for a ramble on his own account," answered Errington readily. "You know his fancies!"

"I wish his fancies would leave him," grumbled Güldmar. "He promised to light a fire and spread the meal—and now, who knows whither he has wandered?

"Never mind, sir," said Lorimer; "Engage me as a kitchen-boy. I can light a fire, and can also sit beside it when it is properly kindled. More I cannot promise. As the housemaids say when they object to assist the cook,—it would be *beneath* me."

"Cook!" cried Duprèz, catching at this word. "I can cook! Give me anything to broil. I will broil it! You have coffee—I will make it!" And in the twinkling of an eye he had divested himself of his coat, turned up his cuffs, and manufactured the cap of a *chef* out of a newspaper which he stuck jauntily on his head. "Behold me, *messieurs, à votre service!*"

His liveliness was infectious; they all set to work with a will, and in a few moments a crackling wood-fire blazed cheerily on the ground, and the gipsy preparations for the *al fresco* supper went on apace amid peals of laughter. Soon the fragrance of steaming coffee arose and mingled itself with the resinous odours of the surrounding pine-

trees,—while Macfarlane distinguished himself by catching a fine salmon trout in a quiet nook of the rushing river, and this Duprèz cooked in a style that would have done honour to a *cordon bleu*. They made an excellent meal, and sang songs in turn and told stories,—Olaf Güldmar, in particular, related eerie legends of the *Dovre-fjelde*, and many a striking history of ancient origin, full of terror and superstition, — concerning witches, devils, and spirits both good and evil, who are still believed to have their abode on the Norwegian hills,—for, as the *bonde* remarked with a smile, "when civilization has driven these unearthly beings from every other refuge in the world, they will always be sure of a welcome in Norway."

It was eleven o'clock when they at last retired within the hut to rest for the night, and the errant Sigurd had not returned. The sun shone brilliantly, but there was no window to the small shed, and light and air came only through the door, which was left wide open. The tired travellers lay down on their spread-out rugs and blankets, and wishing each other a cheerful "good night," were soon fast asleep. Errington was rather restless, and lay awake for some little time, listening to the stormy discourse of the Fall; but at last his eyelids yielded to the heaviness that oppressed them, and he sank into a light slumber.

Meanwhile the imperial sun rode majestically downwards to the edge of the horizon,—and the sky blushed into the pale tint of a wild rose, that deepened softly and steadily with an ever-increasing fiery brilliance as the minutes glided noiselessly on to the enchanted midnight hour. A wind began to rustle mysteriously among the pines—then gradually growing wrathful, strove to whistle a loud defiance to the roar of the tumbling waters. Through the little nooks and crannies of the roughly constructed cabin where the travellers slept, it uttered small wild shrieks of warning or dismay—and, suddenly, as though touched by an invisible hand, Sir Philip awoke. A crimson glare streaming through the open door dazzled his drowsy eyes—was it a forest on fire? He started up in dreamy alarm,—then remembered where he was. Realizing that there must be an exceptionally fine sky to cast so ruddy a reflection on the ground, he threw on his cloak and went outside.

What a wondrous, almost unearthly scene greeted him! His first impulse was to shout aloud in sheer ecstasy—his next to stand silent in reverential awe. The great Fall was no longer a sweeping flow of white foam—it had changed to a sparkling shower of rubies, as though some great genie, tired of his treasures, were flinging them away by giant handfuls, in the most reckless haste and lavish abundance. From the bottom of

the cascade a crimson vapour arose, like smoke from flame, and the whirling rapids, deeply red for the most part, darkened here and there into an olive-green flecked with gold, while the spray, tossed high over interrupting rocks and boulders, glittered as it fell like small fragments of broken opal. The sky was of one dense uniform rose-colour from west to east,—soft and shimmering as a broad satin pavilion freshly unrolled,—the sun was invisible, hidden behind the adjacent mountains, but his rays touched some peaks in the distance, on which white wreaths of snow lay, bringing them into near and sparkling prominence.

The whole landscape was transformed—the tall trees rustling and swaying in the now boisterous wind took all flickering tints of colour on their trunks and leaves,—the grey stones and pebbles turned to lumps of gold and heaps of diamonds, and on the other side of the rapids, a large tuft of heather in a cleft of the rocks glowed with extraordinary vividness and warmth like a suddenly kindled fire. A troop of witches dancing wildly on the sward,—a ring of fairies,—kelpies tripping from crag to crag,—a sudden chorus of sweet-voiced water-nymphs—nothing unreal or fantastical would have surprised Errington at that moment. Indeed, he almost expected something of the kind—the scene was so eminently fitted for it.

"Positively, I must wake Lorimer," he thought

to himself. "He oughtn't to miss such a gorgeous spectacle as this."

He moved a little more in position to view the Fall. What was that small dark object running swiftly yet steadily along on the highest summit of those jutting crags? He rubbed his eyes amazedly—was it—could it be *Sigurd?* He watched it for a moment,—then uttered a loud cry as he saw it pause on the very ledge of rock from which but a short while since, he himself had been so nearly precipitated. The figure was now distinctly visible, outlined in black against the flaming crimson of the sky,—it stood upright and waved its arms with a frantic gesture. There was no mistaking it—it *was* Sigurd!

Without another second's hesitation Errington rushed back to the hut and awoke, with clamorous alarm, the rest of the party. His brief explanation sufficed—they all hurried forth in startled excitement. Sigurd still occupied his hazardous position, and as they looked at him he seemed to dance wildly nearer the extreme edge of the rocky platform. Old Güldmar turned pale. "The gods preserve him!" he muttered in his beard—then turning, he began resolutely to make the ascent of the rocks with long, rapid strides—the young men followed him eager and almost breathless, each and all bent upon saving Sigurd from the danger in which he stood, and trying by different ways to get more quickly near the unfortunate lad and

call, or draw him back by force from his point of imminent deadly peril. They were more than half-way up, when a piercing cry rang clearly above the thunderous din of the fall—a cry that made them pause for a moment.

Sigurd had caught sight of the figures advancing to his rescue, and was waving them back with eloquent gestures of anger and defiance. His small misshapen body was alive with wrath, —it seemed as though he were some dwarf king ruling over the glittering crimson torrent, and grimly forbidding strangers to enter on the boundaries of his magic territory. They, however, pressed on with renewed haste,—and they had nearly reached the summit when another shrill cry echoed over the sunset-coloured foam.

Once more they paused—they were in full view of the distraught Sigurd, and he turned his head towards them, shaking back his long fair hair with his old favourite gesture and laughing in apparent glee. Then he suddenly raised his arms, and, clasping his hands together, poised himself as though he were some winged thing about to fly.

"Sigurd! Sigurd!" shouted Güldmar, his strong voice tremulous with anguish. "Come back! come back to Thelma!"

At the sound of that beloved name, the unhappy creature seemed to hesitate, and, profiting by that instant of irresolution, Errington and

Lorimer rushed forward——Too late! Sigurd saw them coming, and glided with stealthy caution to the very brink of the torrent, where there was scarcely any foothold—there he looked back at his would-be rescuers with an air of mystery and cunning, and broke into a loud derisive laugh.

Then—still with clasped hands and smiling face—unheeding the shout of horror that broke from those who beheld him — he leaped, and fell! Down, down into the roaring abyss! For one half-second — one lightning flash—his twisted figure, like a slight black speck was seen against the wide roseate glory of the tumbling cascade—then—it disappeared, engulfed and lost for ever! Gone,—with all his wild poet fancies and wandering dreams—gone, with his unspoken love and unguessed sorrows—gone where dark things shall be made light,—and where the broken or tangled chain of the soul's intelligence shall be mended and made perfect by the tender hands of the All-Wise and the All-Loving One, whose ways are too gloriously vast for our finite comprehension.

"Gone, mistress!" as he would have said to the innocent cause of his heart's anguish. "Gone where I shall grow straight and strong and brave! Mistress, if you meet me in Valhalla, you will love me!"

CHAPTER XVII.

"Do not, I pray you, think evilly of so holy a man! He has a sore combat against the flesh and the devil!"—*The Maid of Honour.*

THE horror-stricken spectators of the catastrophe stood for a minute inert and speechless,—stupefied by its suddenness and awful rapidity. Then with one accord they hurried down to the level shore of the torrent, moved by the unanimous idea that they might possibly succeed in rescuing Sigurd's frail corpse from the sharp teeth of the jagged rocks, that, piercing upwards through the foam of the roaring rapids, were certain to bruise, tear, and disfigure it beyond all recognition. But even this small satisfaction was denied them. There was no sign of a floating or struggling body anywhere visible. And while they kept an eager look-out, the light in the heavens slowly changed. From burning crimson it softened to a tender amethyst hue, as smooth and delicate as the glossy pale tint of the purple clematis,—and with it the rosy foam of the Fall graduated to varying

tints of pink, from pink to tender green, and lastly, it became as a shower of amber wine. Güldmar spoke first in a voice broken by deep emotion.

"'Tis all over with him, poor lad!" he said, and tears glittered thickly in his keen old eyes. "And—though the gods, of a surety, know best—this is an end I looked not for! A mournful home-returning shall we have—for how to break the news to Thelma is more than I can tell!"

And he shook his head sorrowfully while returning the warm and sympathizing pressure of Errington's hand.

"You see," he went on, with a wistful look at the grave and compassionate face of his accepted son-in-law—"the boy was no boy of mine, 'tis true—and the winds had more than their share of his wits—yet—we knew him from a baby—and my wife loved him for his sad estate, which he was not to blame for. Thelma, too—he was her first playmate——"

The *bonde* could trust himself to say no more, but turned abruptly away, brushing one hand across his eyes, and was silent for many minutes. The young men, too, were silent,—Sigurd's determined suicide had chilled and sickened them. Slowly they returned to the hut to pass the remaining hours of the night—though sleep was, of course, after what they had witnessed, impossible. They remained awake, therefore, talking in low tones of the fatal event, and listening to the solemn *sough*

of the wind through the pines, that sounded to Errington's ears like a monotonous forest dirge. He thought of the first time he had ever seen the unhappy creature whose wandering days had just ended,—of that scene in the mysterious shell-cavern,—of the wild words he had then uttered—how strangely they came back to Philip's memory now!

"You have come as a thief in the golden midnight, and the thing you seek is the life of Sigurd! Yes—yes! it is true—the spirit cannot lie! You must kill, you must steal—see how the blood drips, drop by drop, from the heart of Sigurd! and the jewel you steal,—ah! what a jewel! You shall not find such another in Norway!" Was not the hidden meaning of these incoherent phrases rendered somewhat clear now? though how the poor lad's disordered imagination had been able thus promptly to conjure up with such correctness an idea of Errington's future relations with Thelma, was a riddle impossible of explanation. He thought, too, with a sort of generous remorse, of that occasion when Sigurd had visited him on board the yacht to implore him to leave the Altenfjord. He realized everything,—the inchoate desires of the desolate being, who, though intensely capable of loving, felt himself in a dim, sad way, unworthy of love,—the struggling passions in him that clamoured for utterance—the instinctive dread and jealousy of a rival, while

knowing that he was both physically and mentally unfitted to compete with one,—all these things passed through Philip's mind, and filled him with a most profound pity for the hidden sufferings, the tortures and inexplicable emotions which had racked Sigurd's darkened soul. And, still busy with these reflections, he turned on his arm as he lay, and whispered softly to his friend who was close by him—

"I say, Lorimer,—I feel as if I had been to blame somehow in this affair! If I had never come on the scene, Sigurd would still have been happy in his own way."

Lorimer was silent. After a pause, Errington went on still in the same low tone.

"Poor little fellow! Do you know, I can't imagine anything more utterly distracting than having to see such a woman as Thelma day after day,—loving her all the time, and knowing such love to be absolutely hopeless! Why, it was enough to make him crazier than ever!"

Lorimer moved restlessly. "Yes, it must have been hard on him!" he answered, at last, in a gentle, somewhat sad tone. "Perhaps it's as well he's out of it all. Life is infinitely perplexing to many of us. By this time he's no doubt wiser than you or I, Phil,—he could tell us the reason why love is such a blessing to some men, and such a curse to others!"

Errington made no answer, and they relapsed

into silence—silence which was almost unbroken save by an occasional deep sigh from Olaf Güldmar, and a smothered exclamation such as, "Poor lad, poor lad! Who would have thought it?"

With the early dawn they were all up and ready for the homeward journey,—though with very different feelings to those with which they had started on their expedition. The morning was dazzlingly bright and clear,—and the cataract of Njedegorze rolled down in glittering folds of creamy white and green, uttering its ceaseless psalm of praise to the Creator in a jubilant roar of musical thunder. They paused and looked at it for the last time before leaving,—it had assumed for them a new and solemn aspect—it was Sigurd's grave. The *bonde* raised his cap from his rough white hair, —instinctively the others followed his example.

"May the gods grant him good rest!" said the old man reverently. "In the wildest waters they say there is a calm under-flow,—maybe the lad has found it and is glad to sleep." He paused and stretched his hands forth with an eloquent and touching gesture. "Peace be with him!"

Then, without more words, and as though disdaining his own emotion, he turned abruptly away, and began to descend the stony and precipitous hill up which Sigurd had so skilfully guided them the day before. Macfarlane and Duprèz followed him close,—Macfarlane casting more than once a keen look over the rapids.

"'Tis a pity we couldna find his body," he said in a low tone.

Duprèz shrugged his shoulders. Sigurd's death had shocked him considerably by its suddenness, but he was too much of a volatile Frenchman to be morbidly anxious about securing the corpse.

"I think not so at all," he said. "Of what use would it be? To grieve *mademoiselle?* to make her cry? That would be cruel—I would not assist in it! A dead body is not a sight for ladies,—believe me, things are best as they are."

They went on, while Errington and Lorimer lingered yet a moment longer.

"A magnificent sepulchre!" said Lorimer, dreamily eyeing for the last time the sweeping flow of the glittering torrent. "Better than all the monuments ever erected! Upon my life, I would not mind having such a grave myself! Say what you like, Phil, there was something grand in Sigurd's choice of a death. We all of us have to get out of life somehow one day—that's certain—but few of us have the chance of making such a triumphant exit!"

Errington looked at him with a grave smile. "How you talk, George!" he said half-reproachfully. "One would think you envied the end of that unfortunate, half-witted fellow! You've no reason to be tired of your life, I'm sure,—all your bright days are before you."

"Are they?" And Lorimer's blue eyes looked slightly melancholy. "Well, I dare say they are! Let's hope so at all events. There need be something before me,—there isn't much behind except wasted opportunities. Come on, Phil!"

They resumed their walk, and soon rejoined the others. The journey back to the Altenfjord was continued all day with but one or two interruptions for rest and refreshment. It was decided that on reaching home, old Güldmar should proceed a little in advance, in order to see his daughter alone first, and break to her the news of the tragic event that had occurred,—so that when, after a long and toilsome journey, they caught sight, at about eight in the evening, of the familiar farmhouse through the branches of the trees that surrounded and sheltered it, they all came to a halt.

The young men seated themselves on a pleasant knoll under some tall pines, there to wait a quarter of an hour or so, while the *bonde* went forward to prepare Thelma. On second thoughts, the old man asked Errington to accompany him, —a request to which he very readily acceded, and these two, leaving the others to follow at their leisure, went on their way rapidly. They arrived at, and entered the garden,—their footsteps made a crunching noise on the pebbly path,—but no welcoming face looked forth from any of the windows of the house. The entrance door stood

wide open,—there was not a living soul to be seen but the kitten asleep in a corner of the porch, and the doves drowsing on the roof in the sunshine. The deserted air of the place was unmistakable, and Güldmar and Errington exchanged looks of wonder not unmixed with alarm.

"Thelma! Thelma!" called the *bonde* anxiously. There was no response. He entered the house and threw open the kitchen door. There was no fire,—and not the slightest sign of any of the usual preparations for supper.

"Britta!" shouted Güldmar. Still no answer. "By the gods!" he exclaimed, turning to the astonished Philip, "This is a strange thing! Where can the girls be? I have never known both of them to be absent from the house at the same time. Go down to the shore, my lad, and see if Thelma's boat is missing, while I search the garden."

Errington obeyed—hurrying off on his errand with a heart beating fast from sudden fear and anxiety. For he knew Thelma was not likely to have gone out of her own accord at the very time she would have naturally expected her father and his friends back, and the absence of Britta too, was, to say the least of it, extraordinary. He reached the pier very speedily, and saw at a glance that the boat was gone. He hastened back to report this to Güldmar, who was making the whole place resound with his shouts of "Thelma!"

and "Britta!" though he shouted altogether in vain.

"Maybe," he said dubiously, on hearing of the missing boat—"Maybe the child has gone on the Fjord—'tis often her custom,—but, then, where is Britta? Besides, they must have expected us—they would have prepared supper—they would have been watching for our return. No, no! there is something wrong about this—'tis altogether unusual."

And he looked about him in a bewildered way, while Sir Philip, noting his uneasiness, grew more and more uneasy himself.

"Let me go and search for them, sir," he said eagerly. "They may be in the woods, or up towards the orchard."

Güldmar shook his head and drew his fuzzy white brows together in puzzled meditation—suddenly he started and struck his staff forcibly on the ground.

"I have it!" he exclaimed. "That old hag Lovisa is at the bottom of this!"

"By Jove!" cried Errington. "I believe you're right! What shall we do?"

At that moment, Lorimer, Duprèz, and Macfarlane came on the scene thinking they had kept aloof long enough,—and the strange disappearance of the two girls was rapidly explained to them. They listened astonished and almost incredulous, but agreed with the *bonde* as to Lovisa's probable share in the matter.

"Look here!" said Lorimer excitedly. "I'm not in the least tired,—show me the way to Talvig, where that old screech-owl lives, and I'll go there straight as a gun! Shouldn't wonder if she has not forced away her grandchild, in which case Miss Thelma may have gone after her."

"I'll come with you!" said Errington. "Let's lose no time about it."

But Güldmar shook his head. "Tis a long way, my lads,—and you do not know the road. No—'twill be better we should take the boat and pull over to Bosekop, there we can get a carriole to take two of us at least to Talvig——"

He stopped, interrupted by Macfarlane, who looked particularly shrewd.

"I should certainly advise ye to try Bosekop first," he remarked cautiously. "Mr. Dyceworthy might be able to provide ye with valuable information."

"Dyceworthy!" roared the *bonde*, becoming inflammable at once. "He knows little of me or mine, thank the gods! and I would not by choice step within a mile of his dwelling. What makes you think of him, sir?"

Lorimer laid a hand soothingly on his arm.

"Now, my dear Mr. Güldmar, don't get excited! Mac is right. I dare say Dyceworthy knows as much in his way as the ancient Lovisa. At any rate, it isn't his fault if he does not. Because you see——" Lorimer hesitated and turned

to Errington. "You tell him, Phil! you know all about it."

"The fact is," said Errington, while Güldmar gazed from one to the other in speechless amazement, "Thelma hasn't told you because she knew how angry you'd be—but Dyceworthy asked her to marry him. Of course she refused him, and I doubt if he's taken his rejection very resignedly."

The face of the old farmer as he heard these words was a study. Wonder, contempt, pride, and indignation struggled for the mastery on his rugged features.

"Asked—her—to—marry—him!" he repeated slowly. "By the sword of Odin! Had I known it I would have throttled him!" His eyes blazed and he clenched his hand. "Throttled him, lads! I would! Give me the chance and I'll do it now! I tell you, the mere look of such a man as that is a desecration to my child,—liar and hypocrite as he is! may the gods confound him!" He paused —then suddenly bracing himself up, added. "I'll away to Bosekop at once—they've been afraid of me there for no reason—I'll teach them to be afraid of me in earnest! Who'll come with me?"

All eagerly expressed their desire to accompany him with the exception of one,—Pierre Duprèz,—he had disappeared,

"Why, where has he gone?" demanded Lorimer in some surprise.

"I canna tell," replied Macfarlane. "He just

slipped awa' while ye were haverin' about Dyceworthy—he'll maybe join us at the shore."

To the shore they at once betook themselves, and were soon busied in unmooring Güldmar's own rowing-boat, which as it had not been used for some time, was rather a tedious business,—moreover they noted with concern that the tide was dead against them.

Duprèz did not appear,—the truth is, that he had taken into his head to start off for Talvig on foot without waiting for the others. He was fond of an adventure and here was one that suited him precisely—to rescue distressed damsels from the grasp of persecutors. He was tired, but he managed to find the road,—and he trudged on determinedly, numming a song of Béranger's as he walked to keep him cheerful. But he had not gone much more than a mile, when he discerned in the distance a carriole approaching him,—and approaching so swiftly that it appeared to swing from side to side of the road at imminent risk of upsetting altogether. There seemed to be one person in it—an excited person too, who lashed the stout little pony and urged it on to fresh exertions with gesticulations and cries. That plump buxom figure—that tumbled brown hair streaming wildly on the breeze,—that round rosy face—why! it was Britta! Britta, driving all alone, with the reckless daring of a Norwegian peasant girl accustomed to the swaying, jolting movement of the

carriole as well as the rough roads and sharp turnings. Nearer she came and nearer—and Duprèz hailed her with a shout of welcome. She saw him, answered his call, and drove still faster,—soon she came up beside him, and without answering his amazed questions, she cried breathlessly—

"Jump in—jump in! We must go on as quickly as possible to Bosekop! Quick—quick! Oh my poor Fröken! The old villain! Wait till I get at him!"

"But, my *leet-le* child!" expostulated Pierre climbing up into the queer vehicle—"What is all this? I am in astonishment—I understand not at all! How comes it that you are run away from home and Mademoiselle also?"

Britta only waited till he was safely seated, and then lashed the pony with redoubled force. Away they clattered at a break-neck pace, the Frenchman having much ado to prevent himself from being jolted out again on the road.

"It is a wicked plot!" she then exclaimed, panting with excitement—"a wicked, wicked plot! This afternoon Mr. Dyceworthy's servant came and brought Sir Philip's card. It said that he had met with an accident and had been brought back to Bosekop and that he wished the Fröken to come to him at once. Of course, the darling believed it all—and she grew so pale, so pale! And she went straight away in her boat all by herself! Oh my dear—my dear!"

Britta gasped for breath, and Duprèz soothingly placed an arm round her waist, an action which the little maiden seemed not to be aware of. She resumed her story—"Then the Fröken had not been gone so very long, and I was watching for her in the garden, when a woman passed by—a friend of my grandmother's. She called out—'Hey Britta! Do you know they have got your mistress down at Talvig, and they'll burn her for a witch before they sleep!' 'She has gone to Bosekop,' I answered, 'so I know you tell a lie.' 'It is no lie,' said the old woman, 'old Lovisa has her this time for sure.' And she laughed and went away. Well, I did not stop to think twice about it—I started off for Talvig at once—I ran nearly all the way. I found my grandmother alone—I asked her if she had seen the Fröken? She screamed and clapped her hands like a mad woman! she said that the Fröken was with Mr. Dyceworthy—Mr. Dyceworthy would know what to do with her!

"*Sapristi*!" ejaculated Duprèz. "This is serious!"

Britta glanced anxiously at him, and went on. "Then she tried to shut the doors upon me and beat me—but I escaped. Outside I saw a man I knew with his carriole, and I borrowed it of him and came back as fast as I could—but oh! I am so afraid—my grandmother said such dreadful things!"

"The others have taken a boat to Bosekop," said Duprèz, to re-assure her. "They may be there by now."

Britta shook her head. "The tide is against them—no! we shall be there first. But," and she looked wistfully at Pierre, "my grandmother said Mr. Dyceworthy had sworn to ruin the Fröken. What did she mean, do you think?"

Duprèz did not answer,—he made a strange grimace and shrugged his shoulders. Then he seized the whip and lashed the pony.

"Faster, faster, *mon cher!*" he cried to that much astonished well-intentioned animal. "It is not a time to sleep, *ma foi!*" Then to Britta—"My little one, you shall see! We shall disturb the good clergyman at his peaceful supper—yes indeed! Be not afraid!"

And with such reassuring remarks he beguiled the rest of the way, which to both of them seemed unusually long, though it was not much past nine when they rattled into the little village called by courtesy a town, and came to a halt within a few paces of the minister's residence. Everything was very quiet—the inhabitants of the place retired to rest early—and the one principal street was absolutely deserted. Duprèz alighted.

"Stay you here, Britta," he said, lightly kissing the hand that held the pony's reins, "I will make an examination of the windows of the house. Yes—before knocking at the door! You

wait with patience. I will let you know everything!"

And with a sense of pleasurable excitement in his mind, he stole softly along on tip-toe—entered the minister's garden, fragrant with roses and mignonette, and then, attracted by the sound of voices, went straight up to the parlour window. The blind was down and he could see nothing, but he heard Mr. Dyceworthy's bland persuasive tones, echoing out with a soft sonorousness, as though he were preaching to some refractory parishioner. He listened attentively.

"Oh strange, strange!" said Mr. Dyceworthy. "Strange that you will not see how graciously the Lord hath delivered you into my hands! Yea, —and no escape is possible! For lo, you yourself, Fröken Thelma," Duprèz started, "you yourself came hither unto my dwelling, a woman all unprotected, to a man equally unprotected,—and who, though a humble minister of saving grace, is not proof against the offered surrender of your charms! Make the best of it, my sweet girl!—make the best of it! You can never undo what you have done to-night."

"Coward!... coward!" and Thelma's rich low voice caused Pierre to almost leap forward from the place where he stood concealed. "You,—*you* made me come here—*you* sent me that card—*you* dared to use the name of my betrothed husband, to gain your vile purpose! *You* have kept me locked in

this room all these hours—and do you think you will not be punished? I will let the whole village know of your treachery and falsehood!"

Mr. Dyceworthy laughed gently. "Dear me, dear me!" he remarked sweetly. "How pretty we look in a passion, to be sure! And we talk of our 'betrothed husband' do we? Tut-tut! Put that dream out of your mind, my dear girl—Sir Philip Bruce-Errington will have nothing to do with you after your little escapade of to-night! Your honour is touched!—yes, yes! and honour is everything to such a man as he. As for the 'card' you talk about, I never sent a card—not I!" Mr. Dyceworthy made this assertion in a tone of injured honesty. "Why should I! No—no! You came here of your own accord,—that is certain, and——" here he spoke more slowly and with a certain malicious glee, "I shall have no difficulty in proving it to be so, should the young man Errington ask me for an explanation! Now you had better give me a kiss and make the peace! There's not a soul in the place who will believe anything you say against me; *you*, a reputed witch, and I, a minister of the Gospel. For your father I care nothing, a poor sinful pagan can never injure a servant of the Lord. Come now, let me have that kiss! I have been very patient—I am sure I deserve it!"

There was a sudden rushing movement in the room, and a slight cry.

"If you touch me!" cried Thelma, "I will kill you! I will! God will help me!"

Again Mr. Dyceworthy laughed sneeringly. "God will help you!" he exclaimed as though in wonder. "As if God ever helped a *Roman!* Fröken Thelma, be sensible. By your strange visit to me to-night you have ruined your already damaged character—I say you have ruined it,—and if anything remains to be said against you, *I* can say it—moreover, I *will!*"

A crash of breaking window-glass followed these words, and before Mr. Dyceworthy could realize what had happened, he was pinioned against his own wall by an active, wiry, excited individual, whose black eyes sparkled with gratified rage, and whose clenched fist was dealing him severe thumps all over his fat body.

"Ha, ha! You will, will you!" cried Duprèz, literally dancing up against him and squeezing him as though he were a jelly. "You will tell lies in the service of *le Bon Dieu?* No—not quite, not yet!" And still pinioning him with one hand, he dragged at his collar with the other till he succeeded, in spite of the minister's unwieldy efforts to defend himself, in rolling him down upon the floor, where he knelt upon him in triumph. "Voila! Je sais faire *la boxe*, moi!" Then turning to Thelma, who stood an amazed spectator of the scene, her flushed cheeks and tear-swollen eyes testifying to the misery of the hours

she had passed, he said, "Run, Mademoiselle, run! The little Britta is outside, she has a pony-car—she will drive you home. I will stay here till Phil-eep comes. I shall enjoy myself! I will begin—Phil-eep will finish! Then we will return to you."

Thelma needed no more words, she rushed to the door, threw it open, and vanished like a bird in air. Britta's joy at seeing her was too great for more than an exclamation of welcome,—and the carriole, with the two girls safely in it, was soon on its rapid way back to the farm. Meanwhile, Olaf Güldmar, with Errington and the others, had just landed at Bosekop after a heavy pull across the Fjord, and they made straight for Mr. Dyceworthy's house,—the *bonde* working himself up as he walked into a positive volcano of wrath. Finding the street-door open as it had just been left by the escaped Thelma, they entered, and on the threshold of the parlour, stopped abruptly, in amazement at the sight that presented itself. Two figures were rolling about on the floor, apparently in a close embrace,—one large and cumbrous, the other small and slight. Sometimes they shook each other,—sometimes they lay still,—sometimes they recommenced rolling. Both were perfectly silent, save that the larger personage seemed to breathe somewhat heavily. Lorimer stepped into the room to secure a better view—then he broke into an irrepressible laugh.

"It's Duprèz," he cried for the benefit of the

others that stood at the door. "By Jove! How did he get here, I wonder?"

Hearing his name, Duprèz looked up from that portion of Mr. Dyceworthy's form in which he had been burrowing, and smiled radiantly.

"Ah, *cher* Lorimer! Put your knee here, will you? So! that is well—I will rest myself!" And he rose, smoothing his roughened hair with both hands, while Lorimer in obedience to his request, kept one knee artistically pressed on the recumbent figure of the minister. "Ah! and there is our Phil-eep, and Sandy, and Monsieur Güldmar! But I do not think," here he beamed all over, "there is much more to be done! He is one bruise, I assure you! He will not preach for many Sundays;—it is bad to be so fat—he will be so exceedingly suffering!"

Errington could not forbear smiling at Pierre's equanimity.

"But what has happened?" he asked. "Is Thelma here?"

"She *was* here," answered Duprèz. "The religious had decoyed her here by means of some false writing,—supposed to be from you. He kept her locked up here the whole afternoon. When I came he was making love and frightening her,—I am pleased I was in time. But"—and he smiled again—"he is well beaten!"

Sir Philip strode up to the fallen Dyceworthy, his face darkening with wrath.

"Let him go, Lorimer," he said sternly,—then, as the reverend gentleman slowly struggled to his feet, moaning with pain, he demanded, "What have you to say for yourself, sir? Be thankful if I do not give you the horse-whipping you deserve, you scoundrel!"

"Let me get at him!" vociferated Güldmar at this juncture, struggling to free himself from the close grasp of the prudent Macfarlane. "I have longed for such a chance! Let me get at him!"

But Lorimer assisted to restrain him from springing forward,—and the old man chafed and swore by his gods in vain.

Mr. Dyceworthy meanwhile meekly raised his eyes, and folded his hands with a sort of pious resignation.

"I have been set upon and cruelly abused," he said mournfully, "and there is no part of me without ache and soreness!" He sighed deeply. "But I am punished rightly for yielding unto carnal temptation put before me in the form of the maiden who came hither unto me with delusive entrancements——"

He stopped, shrinking back in alarm from the suddenly raised fist of the young baronet.

"You'd better be careful!" remarked Philip coolly, with dangerously flashing eyes; "there are four of us here, remember!"

Mr. Dyceworthy coughed, and resumed an air of outraged dignity.

"Truly, I am aware of it!" he said; "and it

surpriseth me not at all that the number of the ungodly outweigheth that of the righteous! Alas! 'why do the heathen rage so furiously together?' Why, indeed! Except that 'in their hearts they imagine a vain thing!' I pardon you, Sir Philip, I freely pardon you! And you also, sir," turning gravely to Duprèz, who received his forgiveness with a cheerful and delighted bow. "You can indeed injure—and you *have* injured this poor body of mine—but you cannot touch the *soul!* No, nor can you hinder that freedom of speech"—here his malignant smile was truly diabolical—"which is my glory, and which shall for ever be uplifted against all manner of evil-doers, whether they be fair women and witches, or misguided pagans——"

Again he paused, rather astonished at Errington's scornful laugh.

"You low fellow!" said the baronet. "From Yorkshire, are you? Well, I happen to know a good many people in that part of the world—and I have some influence there, too. Now, understand me—I'll have you hounded out of the place! You shall find it too hot to hold you—that I swear! Remember! I'm a man of my word! And if you dare to mention the name of Miss Güldmar disrespectfully, I'll thrash you within an inch of your life!"

Mr. Dyceworthy blinked feebly, and drew out his handkerchief.

"I trust, Sir Philip," he said mildly, "you will reconsider your words! It would ill beseem you to strive to do me harm in the parish where my ministrations are welcome, as appealing to that portion of the people who follow the godly Luther. Oh yes!"—and he smiled cheerfully—"you will reconsider your words. In the meantime—I—I"—he stammered slightly—"I apologize! I meant naught but good to the maiden—but I have been misunderstood, as is ever the case with the servants of the Lord. Let us say no more about it! I forgive!—let us all forgive! I will even extend my pardon to the pagan yonder——"

But the "pagan" at that moment broke loose from the friendly grasp in which he had been hitherto held, and strode up to the minister, who recoiled like a beaten cur from the look of that fine old face flushed with just indignation, and those clear blue eyes fiery as the flash of steel.

"Pagan, you call me!" he cried. "I thank the gods for it—I am proud of the title! I would rather be the veriest savage that ever knelt in untutored worship to the great forces of Nature, than such a *thing* as you—a slinking, unclean animal, crawling coward-like between earth and sky, and daring to call itself a *Christian!* Faugh! Were I the Christ, I should sicken at sight of you!"

Dyceworthy made no reply, but his little eyes glittered evilly.

Errington, not desiring any further prolongation of the scene, managed to draw the irate *bonde* away, saying in a low tone—

"We've had enough of this, sir! Let us get home to Thelma."

"I was about to suggest a move," added Lorimer. "We are only wasting time here."

"Ah!" exclaimed Duprèz radiantly—"and Monsieur Dyceworthy will be glad to be in bed! He will be very stiff to-morrow, I am sure! Here is a lady who will attend him."

This with a courteous salute to the wooden-faced Ulrika, who suddenly confronted them in the little passage. She seemed surprised to see them, and spoke in a monotonous dreamy tone, as though she walked in her sleep.

"The girl has gone?" she added slowly.

Duprèz nodded briskly. "She has gone! And let me tell you, madame, that if it had not been for you, she would not have come here at all. You took that card to her?"

Ulrika frowned. "I was compelled," she said. "*She* made me take it. I promised." She turned her dull eyes slowly on Güldmar. "It was Lovisa's fault. Ask Lovisa about it." She paused, and moistened her dry lips with her tongue. "Where is your crazy lad?" she asked, almost anxiously. "Did he come with you?"

"He is dead!" answered Guldmar, with grave coldness.

"Dead!" And to their utter amazement, she threw up her arms and burst into a fit of wild laughter. "Dead! Thank God! Thank God! Dead! And through no fault of mine! The Lord be praised! He was only fit for death—never mind how he died—it is enough that he is dead—dead! I shall see him no more—he cannot curse me again!—the Lord be thanked for all His mercies!"

And her laughter ceased—she threw her apron over her head and broke into a passion of weeping.

"The woman must be crazy!" exclaimed the *bonde*, thoroughly mystified,—then placing his arm through Errington's, he said impatiently, "You're right, my lad! We've had enough of this. Let us shake the dust of this accursèd place off our feet and get home: I'm tired out!"

They left the minister's dwelling and made straight for the shore, and were soon well on their journey back to the farm across the Fjord. This time, the tide was with them—the evening was magnificent, and the coolness of the breeze, the fresh lapping of the water against the boat, and the brilliant tranquillity of the landscape soon calmed their over-excited feelings. Thelma was waiting for them under the porch as usual, looking a trifle paler than her wont, after all the worry and fright and suspense she had undergone,—but the caresses of her father and lover soon brought back the rosy

warmth on her fair face and restored the lustre to her eyes. Nothing was said about Sigurd's fate just then,—when she asked for her faithful servitor, she was told he had "gone wandering as usual," and it was not till Errington and his friends returned to their yacht that old Güldmar, left alone with his daughter, broke the sad news to her very gently. But the shock, so unexpected and terrible, was almost too much for her already overwrought nerves,—and such tears were shed for Sigurd as Sigurd himself might have noted with gratitude. Sigurd—the loving, devoted Sigurd—gone for ever! Sigurd,—her playmate,—her servant,—her worshipper,—dead! Ah, how tenderly she mourned him!—how regretfully she thought of his wild words! "Mistress, you are killing poor Sigurd!" Wistfully she wondered if, in her absorbing love for Philip, she had neglected the poor crazed lad,—his face, in all its pale piteous appeal, haunted her, and her grief for his loss was the greatest she had ever known since the day on which she had seen her mother sink into the last long sleep. Britta, too, wept and would not be comforted—she had been fond of Sigurd in her own impetuous little way,—and it was some time before either she or her mistress could calm themselves sufficiently to retire to rest. And long after Thelma was sleeping, with tears still wet on her cheeks, her father sat alone under his porch, lost in melancholy meditation. Now

and then he ruffled his white hair impatiently with his hand,—his daughter's adventure in Mr. Dyceworthy's house had vexed his proud spirit. He knew well enough that the minister's apology meant nothing—that the whole village would be set talking against Thelma more, even than before,—that there was no possibility of preventing scandal so long as Dyceworthy was there to start it. He thought and thought and puzzled himself with probabilities—till at last, when he finally rose to enter his dwelling for the night, he muttered half-aloud. "If it must be, it must! And the sooner the better now, I think, for the child's sake."

The next morning Sir Philip arrived unusually early,—and remained shut up with the *bonde*, in private conversation for more than an hour. At the expiration of that time, Thelma was called, and taken into their confidence. The result of their mysterious discussion was not immediately evident, —though for the next few days, the farm-house lost its former tranquillity, and became a scene of bustle and excitement. Moreover, to the astonishment of the Bosekop folk, the sailing-brig known as the *Valkyrie*, belonging to Olaf Güldmar, which had been hauled up high and dry on the shore for many months, was suddenly seen afloat on the Fjord, and Valdemar Svensen, Errington's pilot, appeared to be busily engaged upon her decks, putting everything in ship-shape order. It was no use asking *him* any questions—he was not the man to gratify

impertinent curiosity. By-and-by a rumour got about in the village—Lovisa had gained her point in one particular,—the Güldmars were going away—going to leave the Altenfjord!

At first, the report was received with incredulity—but gained ground, as people began to notice that several packages were being taken in boats from the farm-house to both the *Eulalie* and the *Valkyrie.* These preparations excited a great deal of interest and inquisitiveness,—but no one dared ask for information as to what was about to happen. The Reverend Mr. Dyceworthy was confined to his bed "from a severe cold"—as he said, and therefore was unable to perform his favourite mission of spy,—so that when, one brilliant morning, Bosekop was startled by the steam-whistle of the *Eulalie* blowing furiously, and echoing far and wide across the surrounding rocky islands, several of the lounging inhabitants paused on the shore or sauntered down to the rickety pier, to see what was the cause of the clamour. Even the long-suffering minister crawled out of bed and applied his fat, meek visage to his window, from whence he could command an almost uninterrupted view of the glittering water. Great was his amazement and discomfiture to see the magnificent yacht moving majestically out of the Fjord, with Güldmar's brig in tow behind her, and the English flag fluttering gaily from her middle-mast, as she curtsied her farewell to the dark mountains and glided swiftly over the little

hissing waves. Had Mr. Dyceworthy been possessed of a field-glass he might have been able to discern on her deck the figure of a tall, fair girl, who, drawing her crimson hood over her rich hair, stood gazing with wistful, dreamy blue eyes at the fast receding shores of the Altenfjord—eyes that smiled and yet were tearful.

"Are you sorry, Thelma?" asked Errington gently, as he passed one arm tenderly round her. "Sorry to trust your life to me?"

She laid her little hand in playful reproach against his lips.

"Sorry! you foolish boy! I am glad and grateful! But it is saying good-bye to one's old life, is it not? The dear old home!—and poor Sigurd!"

Her voice trembled, and bright tears fell.

"Sigurd is happy,"—said Errington gravely, taking the hand that caressed him and reverently kissing it—"Believe me, love,—if he had lived some cruel misery might have befallen him—it is better as it is!"

Thelma did not answer for a minute or two—then she said suddenly—

"Philip, do you remember where I saw you first?"

"Perfectly!" he answered, looking fondly into the sweet upturned face. "Outside a wonderful cavern, which I afterwards explored."

She started and seemed surprised. "You went inside?—you saw ——?"

"Everything!"—and Philip related his adventure of that morning and his first interview with Sigurd. She listened attentively—then she whispered softly—

"My mother sleeps there, you know,—yesterday I went to take her some flowers for the last time. Father came with me—we asked her blessing. And I think she will give it, Philip—she must know how good you are and how happy I am."

He stroked her silky hair tenderly and was silent. The *Eulalie* had reached the outward bend of the Altenfjord, and the station of Bosekop was rapidly disappearing. Olaf Güldmar and the others came on deck to take their last look of it.

"I shall see the old place again, I doubt not, long before you do, Thelma, child," said the stout old *bonde*, viewing, with a keen fond glance, the stretch of the vanishing scenery. "Though when once you are safe married at Christiania, Valdemar Svensen and I will have a fine toss on the seas in the *Valkyrie*,—and I shall grow young again in the storm and drift of the foam and the dark wild waves! Yes—a wandering life suits me—and I am not sorry to have a taste of it once more. There's nothing like it—nothing like a broad ocean and a sweeping wind!"

And he lifted his cap and drew himself erect, inhaling the air like an old warrior scenting battle. The others listened, amused at his enthusiasm,—and, meanwhile, the Altenfjord altogether disap-

peared, and the *Eulalie* was soon plunging in a rougher sea. They were bound for Christiania, where it was decided Thelma's marriage should at once take place—after which Sir Philip would leave his yacht at the disposal of his friends, for them to return in it to England. He himself intended to start directly for Germany with his bride, a trip in which Britta was to accompany them as Thelma's maid. Olaf Güldmar, as he had just stated, purposed making a voyage in the *Valkyrie*, as soon as he should get her properly manned and fitted, which he meant to do at Christiania.

Such were their plans,—and, meanwhile, they were all together on the *Eulalie*,—a happy and sociable party,—Errington having resigned his cabin to the use of his fair betrothed and her little maid, whose delight at the novel change in her life, and her escape from the persecution of her grandmother, was extreme. Onward they sailed,—past the grand Lofoden Islands and all the magnificent scenery extending thence to Christiansund, while the inhabitants of Bosekop looked in vain for their return to the Altenfjord.

The short summer there was beginning to draw to a close,—some of the birds took their departure from the coast,—the dull routine of the place went on as usual, rendered even duller by the absence of the "witch" element of discord,—a circumstance that had kept the superstitious villagers more or

less on a lively tension of religious and resentful excitement—and by-and-by, the rightful minister of Bosekop came back to his duties and released the Reverend Charles Dyceworthy, who straightway returned to his loving flock in Yorkshire. It was difficult to ascertain whether the aged Lovisa was satisfied or wrathful at the departure of the Güldmars with her granddaughter Britta in their company—she kept herself almost buried in her hut at Talvig, and saw no one but Ulrika, who seemed to grow more respectably staid than ever, and who, as a prominent member of the Lutheran congregation, distinguished herself greatly by her godly bearing and uncompromising gloom.

Little by little, the gossips ceased to talk about the disappearance of the "white witch" and her father—little by little they ceased to speculate as to whether the rich Englishman, Sir Philip Errington, really meant to marry her—a consummation of things which none of them seemed to think likely—the absence of their hated neighbours was felt by them as a relief, while the rumoured fate of the crazy Sigurd was of course looked upon as evidence of fresh crime on the part of the "pagan," who was accused of having, in some way or other, caused the unfortunate lad's death. And the old farm-house on the pine-covered knoll was shut up and silent,—its doors and windows safely barred against wind and rain, —and only the doves, left to forage for them-

selves, crooned upon its roof all day, or strutting on the deserted paths, ruffled their plumage in melancholy meditation, as though wondering at the absence of the fair ruling spirit of the place, whose smile had been brighter than the sunshine. The villagers avoided it as though it were haunted —the roses drooped and died untended,—and by degrees the old homestead grew to look like a quaint little picture of forgotten joys, with its deserted porch and fading flowers.

Meanwhile, a thrill of amazement, incredulity, disappointment, indignation, and horror, rushed like a violent electric shock through the upper circles of London society, arousing the deepest disgust in the breasts of match-making matrons, and seriously ruffling the pretty feathers of certain bird-like beauties who had just begun to try their wings, and who "had expectations." The cause of the sensation was very simple. It was an announcement in the *Times*—under the head of "Marriages"—and ran as follows:—

"At the English Consulate, Christiania, Sir Philip Bruce-Errington, Bart., to Thelma, only daughter of Olaf Güldmar, *Bonde*, of the Altenfjord, Norway. No cards."

BOOK II.

THE LAND OF MOCKERY.

CHAPTER I.

> "There's nothing serious in mortality:
> All is but toys."
>
> *Macbeth.*

"I THINK," said Mrs. Rush-Marvelle deliberately, laying down the *Morning Post* beside her breakfast-cup, "I think his conduct is perfectly disgraceful!"

Mr. Rush-Marvelle, a lean gentleman with a sallow, clean-shaven face and an apologetic, almost frightened manner, looked up hastily.

"Of whom are you speaking, my dear?" he inquired.

"Why, of that wretched young man Bruce-Errington! He ought to be ashamed of himself!" And Mrs. Marvelle fixed her glasses more firmly on her small nose, and regarded her husband almost reproachfully. "Don't tell me, Montague, that you've forgotten that scandal about him! He went off last year, in the middle of the season, to Norway in his yacht with three of the very fastest fellows he could pick out from his acquaintance—regular reprobates, so I'm told—and after leading

the most awful life out there making love to all the peasant girls in the place, he married one of them,—a common farmer's daughter. Don't you remember? We saw the announcement of his marriage in the *Times*."

"Ah yes, yes!" And Mr. Rush-Marvelle smiled a propitiatory smile, intended to soothe the evidently irritated feelings of his better-half, of whom he stood always in awe. "Of course, of course! A very sad *mésalliance*. Yes, yes! Poor fellow! And is there fresh news of him?"

"Read *that*,"—and the lady handed the *Morning Post* across the table, indicating by a dent of her polished finger-nail the paragraph that had offended her sense of social dignity. Mr. Marvelle read it with almost laborious care—though it was remarkably short and easy of comprehension.

"Sir Philip and Lady Bruce-Errington have arrived at their house in Prince's Gate from Errington Manor."

"Well, my dear?" he inquired, with a furtive and anxious glance at his wife. "I suppose—er—it—er—it was to be expected?"

"No, it was *not* to be expected," said Mrs. Rush-Marvelle, rearing her head and heaving her ample bosom to and fro in rather a tumultuous manner. "Of course it was to be expected that Bruce-Errington would behave like a fool—his father was a fool before him. But I say it was

not to be expected that he would outrage society by bringing that common wife of his to London, and expecting *us* to receive her! The thing is perfectly scandalous! He has had the decency to keep away from town ever since his marriage—part of the time he has stayed abroad, and since January he has been at his place in Warwickshire,—and this time—observe this!" and Mrs. Marvelle looked most impressive—"not a soul has been invited to the Manor—not a living soul! The house used to be full of people during the winter season—of course, now, he dare not ask anybody lest they should be shocked at his wife's ignorance. That's as clear as daylight! And now he has the impudence to actually bring her here,—into *society!* Good Heavens! He must be mad! He will be laughed at wherever he goes!"

Mr. Rush-Marvelle scratched his bony chin perplexedly.

"It makes it a little awkward for—for you," he remarked feelingly.

"Awkward! It is abominable!" And Mrs. Marvelle rose from her chair and shook out the voluminous train of her silken breakfast-gown, an elaborate combination of crimson with grey chinchilla fur. "I shall have to call on the creature—just imagine it! It is most unfortunate for me that I happen to be one of Bruce-Errington's oldest friends—otherwise I might have passed him over in some way—as it is I can't. But

fancy having to meet a great coarse peasant woman, who, I'm certain, will only be able to talk about fish and whale-oil! It is really *quite* dreadful!"

Mr. Rush-Marvelle permitted himself to smile faintly.

"Let us hope she will not turn out so badly," he said soothingly,—"but, you know, if she proves to be—er—a common person of,—er—a very uneducated type—you can always let her drop gently—quite gently!"

And he waved his skinny hand with an explanatory flourish.

But Mrs. Marvelle did not accept his suggestion in good part.

"You know nothing about it," she said somewhat testily. "Keep to your own business, Montague, such as it is. The law suits your particular form of brain—society does not. You would never be in society at all if it were not for me—now you know you wouldn't!"

"My love," said Mr. Marvelle, with a look of meek admiration at his wife's majestic proportions. "I am aware of it! I always do you justice. You are a remarkable woman!"

Mrs. Marvelle smiled, somewhat mollified. "You see," she then condescended to explain—"the whole thing is so extremely disappointing to me. I wanted Marcia Van Clupp to go in for the Errington stakes,—it would have been such

an excellent match,—money on both sides. And Marcia would have been just the girl to look after that place down in Warwickshire—the house is going to rack and ruin, in *my* opinion."

"Ah, yes!" agreed her husband mildly. "Van Clupp is a fine girl—a *very* fine girl! No end of 'go' in her. And so Errington Manor needs a good deal of repairing, perhaps?" This query was put by Mr. Marvelle, with his head very much on one side, and his bilious eyes blinking drowsily.

"I don't know about repairs," replied Mrs. Marvelle. "It is a magnificent place, and certainly the grounds are ravishing. But one of the best rooms in the house is the former Lady Errington's boudoir—it is full of old-fashioned dirty furniture, and Bruce-Errington won't have it touched,—he will insist on keeping it as his mother left it. Now that is ridiculous—perfectly morbid! It's just the same thing with his father's library—he won't have that touched either—and the ceiling wants fresh paint, and the windows want new curtains—and all sorts of things ought to be done. Marcia would have managed all that splendidly — she'd have had everything new throughout—Americans are so quick, and there's no nonsensical antiquated sentiment about Marcia."

"She might even have had new pictures and done away with the old ones," observed Mr. Marvelle, with a feeble attempt at satire. His wife

darted a keen look at him, but smiled a little too. She was not without a sense of humour.

"Nonsense, Montague! She knows the value of works of art better than many a so-called connoisseur. I won't have you make fun of her. Poor girl! She *did* speculate on Bruce-Errington,—you know he was very attentive to her at that ball I gave just before he went off to Norway."

"He certainly seemed rather amused by her," said Mr. Marvelle. "Did she take it to heart when she heard he was married?"

"I should think not," replied Mrs. Marvelle loftily. "She has too much sense. She merely said, 'All right! I must stick to Masherville!'"

Mr. Marvelle nodded blandly. "Admirable,—admirable!" he murmured, with a soft little laugh. "A *very* clever girl—a very bright creature! And really there are worse fellows than Masherville! The title is old."

"Yes, the title is all very well," retorted his wife—"but there's no money—or at least very little."

"Marcia has sufficient to cover any deficit?" suggested Mr. Marvelle, in a tone of meek inquiry.

"An American woman *never* has sufficient," declared Mrs. Marvelle. "You know that as well as I do. And poor dear Mrs. Van Clupp has so set her heart on a really brilliant match for

her girl—and I had positively promised she should have Bruce-Errington. It is really too bad!" And Mrs. Marvelle paced the room with a stately, sweeping movement, pausing every now and then to glance at herself approvingly in the mirror above the chimney-piece, while her husband resumed his perusal of the *Times*. By-and-by she said abruptly—

"Montague!"

Mr. Marvelle dropped his paper with an alarmed air.

"My dear!"

"I shall go to Clara Winsleigh this morning—and see what she means to do in the matter. Poor Clara! She must be disgusted at the whole affair!"

"She had rather a liking for Errington, hadn't she?" inquired Mr. Marvelle, folding up the *Times* in a neat parcel, preparatory to taking it with him in order to read it in peace on his way to the Law Courts.

"Liking? Well!" And Mrs. Marvelle, looking at herself once more in the glass, carefully arranged the ruffle of Honiton lace about her massive throat,—"It was a little more than liking—though, of course, her feelings were perfectly proper, and all that sort of thing,—at least, I suppose they were! She had a great friendship for him,—one of those emotional, perfectly spiritual and innocent attachments, I believe, which are so

rare in this wicked world." Mrs. Marvelle sighed, then suddenly becoming practical again, she continued. "Yes, I shall go there and stop to luncheon, and talk this thing over. Then I'll drive on to the Van Clupps, and bring Marcia home to dinner. I suppose you don't object?"

"Object!" Mr. Marvelle made a deprecatory gesture, and raised his eyes in wonder. As if he dared object to anything whatsoever that his wife desired!

She smiled graciously as he approached and respectfully kissed her smooth cool cheek before taking his departure for his daily work as a lawyer in the city, and when he was gone, she betook herself to her own small boudoir, where she busied herself for more than an hour in writing letters and answering invitations.

She was, in her own line, a person of importance. She made it her business to know everything and everybody—she was fond of meddling with other people's domestic concerns, and she had a finger in every family pie. She was, moreover, a regular match-maker,—fond of taking young ladies under her maternal wing, and "introducing" them to the proper quarters, and when, as was often the case, a distinguished American of many dollars but no influence offered her three or four hundred guineas for chaperoning his daughter into English society and marrying her well, Mrs. Rush-Marvelle pocketed the *douceur* quite gracefully, and did her

best for the girl. She was a good-looking woman, tall, portly, and with an air of distinction about her, though her features were by no means striking, and the smallness of her nose was out of all proportion to the majesty of her form—but she had a very charming smile, and a pleasant taking manner, and she was universally admired in that particular "set" wherein she moved. Girls adored her, and wrote her gushing letters, full of the most dulcet flatteries—married ladies on the verge of a scandal, came to her to help them out of their difficulties—old dowagers troubled with rheumatism or refractory daughters, poured their troubles into her sympathizing ears—in short, her hands were full of other people's business to such an extent that she had scarcely any leisure to attend to her own. Mr. Rush-Marvelle,——but why describe this gentleman at all? He was a mere nonentity—known simply as the husband of Mrs. Rush-Marvelle. He knew he was nobody—and, unlike many men placed in a similar position, he was satisfied with his lot. He admired his wife intensely, and never failed to flatter her vanity to the utmost excess, so that, on the whole, they were excellent friends, and agreed much better than most married people.

It was about twelve o'clock in the day when Mrs. Rush-Marvelle's neat little brougham and pair stopped at Lord Winsleigh's great house in Park Lane. A gorgeous flunkey threw open the

door with a virtuously severe expression on his breakfast-flushed countenance, — an expression which relaxed into a smile of condescension on seeing who the visitor was.

"I suppose Lady Winsleigh is at home, Briggs?" inquired Mrs. Marvelle, with the air of one familiar with the ways of the household.

"Yes'm," replied Briggs slowly, taking in the "style" of Mrs. Rush-Marvelle's bonnet, and mentally calculating its cost. "Her ladyship is in the boo-dwar."

"I'll go there," said Mrs. Marvelle, stepping into the hall, and beginning to walk across it in her own important and self-assertive manner. "You needn't announce me."

Briggs closed the street-door, settled his powdered wig, and looked after her meditatively. Then he shut up one eye in a sufficiently laborious manner and grinned. After this, he retired slowly to a small ante-room, where he found the *World* with its leaves uncut. Taking up his master's ivory paper-knife, he proceeded to remedy this slight inconvenience,—and, yawning heavily, he seated himself in a velvet arm-chair, and was soon absorbed in perusing the pages of the journal in question.

Meanwhile Mrs. Marvelle, in her way across the great hall to the "boo-dwar," had been interrupted and nearly knocked down by the playful embrace of a handsome boy, who sprang out upon

her suddenly with a shout of laughter,—a boy of about twelve years old, with frank, bright blue eyes and clustering dark curls.

"Hullo, Mimsey!" cried this young gentleman—"Here you are again! Do you want to see papa? Papa's in there!"—pointing to the door from which he had emerged—"He's correcting my Latin exercise. Five good marks to-day, and I'm going to the circus this afternoon! Isn't it jolly?"

"Dear me, Ernest!" exclaimed Mrs. Marvelle half crossly, yet with an indulgent smile,—"I wish you would not be so boisterous! You've nearly knocked my bonnet off."

"No, I haven't," laughed Ernest—"It's as straight as—wait a bit!" And waving a lead pencil in the air, he drew an imaginary stroke with it. "The middle feather is bobbing up and down just on a line with your nose—it couldn't be better!"

"There, go along, you silly boy!" said Mrs. Marvelle, amused in spite of herself. "Get back to your lessons. There'll be no circus for you if you don't behave properly! I'm going to see your mother."

"Mamma's reading," announced Ernest. "Mudie's cart has just been and brought a lot of new novels. Mamma wants to finish them all before night. I say, are you going to stop to lunch?"

"Ernest, why are you making such a noise in the passage?" said a gentle, grave voice at this juncture. "I am waiting for you, you know. You haven't finished your work yet. Ah, Mrs. Marvelle! How do you do?"

And Lord Winsleigh came forward and shook hands. "You will find her ladyship in, I believe. She will be delighted to see you. This young scapegrace," here he caressed his son's clustering curls tenderly—"has not yet done with his lessons—the idea of the circus to-day seems to have turned his head."

"Papa, you promised you'd let me off Virgil this morning!" cried Ernest, slipping his arm coaxingly through his father's. Lord Winsleigh smiled. Mrs. Rush-Marvelle shook her head with a sort of mild reproachfulness.

"He really ought to go to school," she said, feigning severity. "You will find him too much for you, Winsleigh, in a little while."

"I think not," replied Lord Winsleigh, though an anxious look troubled for an instant the calm of his deep-set grey eyes. "We get on very well together, don't we, Ernest?" The boy glanced up fondly at his father's face and nodded emphatically. "At a public school you see, the boys are educated on hard and fast lines—all ground down to one pattern,—there's no chance of any originality possible. But don't let me detain you, Mrs. Marvelle—you have no doubt much to say

to Lady Winsleigh. Come, Ernest! If I let you off Virgil, you must do the rest of your work thoroughly."

And with a courteous salute, the grave, kindly-faced nobleman re-entered his library, his young son clinging to his arm and pouring forth boyish confidences which seemingly received instant attention and sympathy,—while Mrs. Rush-Marvelle looked after their retreating figures with something of doubt and wonder on her placid features. But whatever her thoughts, they were not made manifest just then. Arriving at a door draped richly with old-gold plush and satin, she knocked.

"Come in!" cried a voice that, though sweet in tone, was also somewhat petulant.

Mrs. Marvelle at once entered, and the occupant of the room sprang up in haste from her luxurious reading-chair, where she was having her long dark tresses brushed out by a prim-looking maid, and uttered an exclamation of delight.

"My dearest Mimsey!" she cried, "This is quite *too* sweet of you! You're just the very person I wanted to see!" And she drew an easy fauteuil to the sparkling fire,—for the weather was cold, with that particularly cruel coldness common to an English May,—and dismissed her attendant. "Now sit down, you dear old darling," she continued, "and let me have all the news!"

Throwing herself back on her lounge, she

laughed, and tossed her waving hair loose over her shoulders, as the maid had left it,—then she arranged, with a coquettish touch here and there, the folds of her pale pink dressing-gown, showered with delicate Valenciennes. She was undeniably a lovely woman. Tall and elegantly formed, with an almost regal grace of manner, Clara, Lady Winsleigh deserved to be considered, as she was, one of the reigning beauties of the day. Her full dark eyes were of a bewitching and dangerous softness,—her complexion was pale, but of such a creamy, transparent pallor as to be almost brilliant,—her mouth was small and exquisitely shaped. True,—her long eyelashes were not altogether innocent of "kohl,"—true, there was a faint odour about her as of rare perfumes and cosmetics,—true, there was something not altogether sincere or natural even in her ravishing smile and fascinating ways—but few, save cynics, could reasonably dispute her physical perfections, or question the right she had to tempt and arouse the passions of men, or to trample underfoot, with an air of insolent superiority, the feelings of women less fair and fortunate. Most of her sex envied her,—but Mrs. Rush-Marvelle, who was past the prime of life, and who, moreover, gained her social successes through intelligence and tact alone, was far too sensible to grudge any woman her beauty. On the contrary, she was a frank admirer of handsome persons, and she surveyed Lady Winsleigh

now through her glasses with a smile of bland approval.

"You are looking very well, Clara," she said. "Let me see—you went to Kissingen in the summer, didn't you?"

"Of course I did," laughed her ladyship. "It was delicious! I suppose you know Lennie came after me there! Wasn't it ridiculous!"

Mrs. Marvelle coughed dubiously. "Didn't Winsleigh put in an appearance at all?" she asked.

Lady Clara's brow clouded. "Oh yes! For a couple of weeks or so. Ernest came with him, of course, and they rambled about together all the time. The boy enjoyed it."

"I remember now," said Mrs. Marvelle. "But I've not seen anything of you since you came back, Clara, except once in the park and once at the theatre. You've been all the time at Winsleigh Court—by-the-by, was Sir Francis Lennox there too?"

"Why, naturally!" replied the beauty, with a cool smile. "He follows me everywhere like a dog! Poor Lennie!"

Again the elder lady coughed significantly.

Clara Winsleigh broke into a ringing peal of laughter, and rising from her lounge, knelt beside her visitor in a very pretty coaxing attitude.

"Come, Mimsey!" she said, "You are not

going to be 'proper' at this time of day! That would be a joke! Darling, indulgent, good old Mimsey!—you don't mean to turn into a prim, prosy, cross Mrs. Grundy! I won't believe it! And you mustn't be severe on poor Lennie—he's such a docile, good boy, and really not bad-looking!"

Mrs. Marvelle fidgeted a little on her chair. "I don't want to talk about *Lennie*, as you call him," she said, rather testily—"Only I think you'd better be careful how far you go with him. I came to consult you on something quite different. What are you going to do about the Bruce-Errington business? You know it was in the *Post* to-day that they've arrived in town. The idea of Sir Philip bringing his common wife into society!—It's too ridiculous!"

Lady Winsleigh sprang to her feet, and her eyes flashed disdainfully.

"What am I going to do?" she repeated, in accents of bitter contempt. "Why, receive them, of course! It will be the greatest punishment Bruce-Errington can have! I'll get all the best people here that I know—and he shall bring his peasant woman among them, and blush for her! It will be the greatest fun out! Fancy a Norwegian farmer's girl lumbering along with her great feet and red hands! . . . and, perhaps, not knowing whether to eat an ice with a spoon or with her fingers! I tell you, Bruce-Errington

will be ready to die for shame—and serve him right too!"

Mrs. Marvelle was rather startled at the harsh, derisive laughter with which her ladyship concluded her excited observations, but she merely observed mildly—

"Well, then, you will leave cards?"

"Certainly!"

"Very good—so shall I," and Mrs. Marvelle sighed resignedly. "What must be, must be! But it's really dreadful to think of it all—I would never have believed Philip Errington could have so disgraced himself!"

"He is no gentleman!" said Lady Winsleigh freezingly. "He has low tastes and low desires. He and his friend Lorimer are two *cads*, in my opinion!"

"Clara!" exclaimed Mrs. Marvelle warningly. "You were fond of him once!—now, don't deny it!"

"Why should I deny it?" and her ladyship's dark eyes blazed with concentrated fury. "I loved him! There! I would have done anything for him! He might have trodden me down under his feet! He knew it well enough—cold, cruel, heartless cynic as he was and is! Yes, I loved him!—but I *hate* him now!"

And she stamped her foot to give emphasis to her wild words. Mrs. Marvelle raised her hands and eyes in utter amazement.

"Clara, Clara! Pray, pray be careful! Suppose any one else heard you going on in this manner! Your reputation would suffer, I assure you! Really, you're horribly reckless! Just think of your husband——"

"My husband!" and a cold gleam of satire played round Lady Winsleigh's proud mouth. She paused and laughed a little. Then she resumed in her old, careless way—"You must be getting very goody-goody, Mimsey, to talk to me about my husband! Why don't you read me a lecture on the duties of wives and the education of children? I am sure you know how profoundly it would interest me!"

She paced up and down the room slowly while Mrs. Marvelle remained discreetly silent. Presently there came a tap at the door, and the gorgeous Briggs entered. He held himself like an automaton, and spoke as though repeating a lesson.

"His lordship's compliments, and will her la'ship lunch in the dining-room to-day?"

"No," said Lady Winsleigh curtly. "Luncheon for myself and Mrs. Marvelle can be sent up here."

Briggs still remained immovable. "His lordship wished to know if Master Hernest was to come to your la'ship before goin' out?"

"Certainly not!" and Lady Winsleigh's brows drew together in a frown. "The boy is a perfect nuisance!"

Briggs bowed and vanished. Mrs. Rush-

Marvelle grew more and more restless. She was a good-hearted woman, and there was something in the nature of Clara Winsleigh that, in spite of her easy-going conscience, she could not altogether approve of.

"Do you never lunch with your husband, Clara?" she asked at last.

Lady Winsleigh looked surprised. "Very seldom. Only when there is company, and I am compelled to be present. A domestic meal would be too *ennuyant!* I wonder you can think of such a thing! And we generally dine out."

Mrs. Marvelle was silent again, and, when she did speak, it was on a less delicate matter.

"When is your great 'crush,' Clara?" she inquired. "You sent me a card, but I forget the date."

"On the twenty-fifth," replied Lady Winsleigh. "This is the fifteenth. I shall call on Lady Bruce-Errington"—here she smiled scornfully—"this afternoon—and to-morrow I shall send them their invitations. My only fear is whether they mayn't refuse to come. I would not miss the chance for the world! I want my house to be the first in which her peasant-ladyship distinguishes herself by her blunders!"

"I'm afraid it'll be quite a scandal!" sighed Mrs. Rush-Marvelle. "Quite! Such a pity! Bruce-Errington was such a promising, handsome young man!"

At that moment Briggs appeared again with an elegantly set luncheon-tray, which he placed on the table with a flourish.

"Order the carriage at half-past three," commanded Lady Winsleigh. "And tell Mrs. Marvelle's coachman that he needn't wait,—I'll drive her home myself."

"But, my dear Clara," remonstrated Mrs. Marvelle, "I must call at the Van Clupps' —— "

"I'll call there with you. I owe them a visit. Has Marcia caught young Masherville yet?"

"Well," hesitated Mrs. Marvelle, "he is rather slippery, you know—so undecided and wavering!"

Lady Winsleigh laughed. "Never mind that! Marcia's a match for him! Rather a taking girl —only *what* an accent! My nerves are on edge whenever I hear her speak."

"It's a pity she can't conquer that defect," agreed Mrs. Marvelle. "I know she has tried. But, after all, they're not the best sort of Americans—— "

"The *best* sort! I should think not! But they're of the *richest* sort, and that's something, Mimsey! Besides, though everybody knows what Van Clupp's father was, they make a good pretence at being well-born,—they don't cram their low connections down your throat, as Bruce-Errington wants to do with his common wife. They ignore all their vulgar belongings delight-

fully! They've been cruelly 'cut' by Mrs. Rippington—she's American—but, then, she's perfect style. Do you remember that big 'at home' at the Van Clupps' when they had a band to play in the back-yard, and everybody was deafened by the noise? Wasn't it quite too ridiculous!"

Lady Winsleigh laughed over this reminiscence, and then betook herself to the consideration of lunch,—a tasty meal which both she and Mrs. Marvelle evidently enjoyed, flavoured as it was with the high spice of scandal concerning their most immediate and mutual friends, who were, after much interesting discussion, one by one condemned as of "questionable" repute, and uncertain position. Then Lady Winsleigh summoned her maid, and was arrayed *cap-à-pie* in "carriage-toilette," while Mrs. Marvelle amused herself by searching the columns of *Truth* for some new tit-bit of immorality connected with the royalty or nobility of England. And at half-past three precisely, the two ladies drove off together in an elegant victoria drawn by a dashing pair of greys, with a respectably apoplectic coachman on the box, supported by the stately Briggs, in all the glory of the olive-green and gold liveries which distinguished the Winsleigh equipage. By her ladyship's desire, they were driven straight to Prince's Gate.

"We may as well leave our cards together," said Clara, with a malicious little smile, "though

I hope to goodness the creature won't be at home."

Bruce-Errington's town-house was a very noble-looking mansion—refined and simple in outer adornment, with a broad entrance, deep portico, and lofty windows—windows which fortunately were not spoilt by gaudy hangings of silk or satin in "æsthetic" colours. The blinds were white—and, what could be seen of the curtains from the outside, suggested the richness of falling velvets and gold-woven tapestries. The drawing-room balconies were full of brilliant flowers, shaded by quaint awnings of Oriental pattern, thus giving the place an air of pleasant occupation and tasteful elegance.

Lady Winsleigh's carriage drew up at the door, and Briggs descended.

"Inquire if Lady Bruce-Errington is at home," said his mistress. "And if not, leave these cards."

Briggs received the scented glossy bits of pasteboard in his yellow-gloved hand with due gravity, and rang the bell marked "Visitors" in his usual ponderous manner, with a force that sent it clanging loudly through the corridors of the stately mansion. The door was instantly opened by a respectable man with grey hair and a gentle, kindly face, who was dressed plainly in black, and who eyed the gorgeous Briggs with the faintest suspicion of a smile. He was Erring-

ton's butler, and had served the family for twenty-five years.

"Her ladyship is driving in the Park," he said in response to the condescending inquiries of Briggs. "She left the house about half an hour ago."

Briggs thereupon handed in the cards, and forthwith reported the result of his interview to Lady Winsleigh, who said with some excitement—

"Turn into the Park and drive up and down till I give further orders."

Briggs mutely touched his hat, mounted the box, and the carriage rapidly bowled in the required direction, while Lady Winsleigh remarked laughingly to Mrs. Marvelle—

"Philip is sure to be with his treasure! If we can catch a glimpse of her, sitting staring open-mouthed at everything, it will be amusing! We shall then know what to expect."

Mrs. Marvelle said nothing, though she too was more or less curious to see the "peasant" addition to the circle of fashionable society,—and when they entered the Park, both she and Lady Winsleigh kept a sharp look-out for the first glimpse of the quiet grey and silver of the Bruce-Errington liveries. They watched, however, in vain—it was not yet the hour for the crowding of the Row—and there was not a sign of the particular equipage they were so desirous to meet.

Presently Lady Winsleigh's face flushed—she laughed—and bade her coachman come to a halt.

"It is only Lennie," she said in answer to Mrs. Marvelle's look of inquiry. "I *must* speak to him a moment!"

And she beckoned coquettishly to a slight, slim young man with a dark moustache and rather handsome features, who was idling along on the footpath, apparently absorbed in a reverie, though it was not of so deep a character that he failed to be aware of her ladyship's presence—in fact he had seen her as soon as she appeared in the Park. He saw everything apparently without looking—he had lazily drooping eyes, but a swift under-glance which missed no detail of whatever was going on. He approached now with an excessively languid air, raising his hat slowly, as though the action bored him.

"How do, Mrs. Marvelle!" he drawled lazily addressing himself first to the elder lady, who responded somewhat curtly,—then leaning his arms on the carriage door, he fixed Lady Winsleigh with a sleepy stare of admiration. "And how is our Clara? Looking charming, as usual! By Jove! Why weren't you here ten minutes ago? You never saw such a sight in your life! Thought the whole Row was going crazy, 'pon my soul!"

"Why, what happened?" asked Lady Wins-

leigh, smiling graciously upon him. "Anything extraordinary?"

"Well, I don't know what you'd call extraordinary;" and Sir Francis Lennox yawned and examined the handle of his cane attentively. "I suppose if Helen of Troy came driving full pelt down the Row all of a sudden, there'd be some slight sensation!"

"Dear me!" said Clara Winsleigh pettishly. "You talk in enigmas to-day. What on earth do you mean?"

Sir Francis condescended to smile. "Don't be waxy, Clara!" he urged—"I mean what I say—a new Helen appeared here to-day, and instead of 'tall Troy' being on fire, as Dante Rossetti puts it, the Row was in a burning condition of excitement—fellows on horseback galloped the whole length of the Park to take a last glimpse of her—her carriage dashed off to Richmond after taking only four turns. She is simply magnificent!"

"Who is she?" and in spite of herself, Lady Winsleigh's smile vanished and her lips quivered.

"Lady Bruce-Errington," answered Sir Francis readily. "The loveliest woman in the world, I should say! Phil was beside her—he looks in splendid condition—and that meek old secretary fellow sat opposite—Neville—isn't that his name? Anyhow they seemed as jolly as pipers, —as for that woman, she'll drive everybody out

of their wits about her before half the season's over."

"But she's a mere peasant!" said Mrs. Marvelle loftily. "Entirely uneducated—a low, common creature!"

"Ah, indeed!" and Sir Francis again yawned extensively. "Well, I don't know anything about that! She was exquisitely dressed, and she held herself like a queen. As for her hair—I never saw such wonderful hair,—there's every shade of gold in it."

"Dyed!" said Lady Winsleigh, with a sarcastic little laugh. "She's been in Paris,—I dare say a good *coiffeur* has done it for her there artistically!"

This time Sir Francis's smile was a thoroughly amused one.

"Commend me to a woman for spite!" he said carelessly. "But I'll not presume to contradict you, Clara! You know best, I dare say! Ta-ta! I'll come for you to-night,—you know we're bound for the theatre together. By-bye, Mrs. Marvelle! You look younger than ever!"

And Sir Francis Lennox sauntered easily away, leaving the ladies to resume their journey through the Park. Lady Winsleigh looked vexed —Mrs. Marvelle bewildered.

"Do you think," inquired this latter, "she can really be so wonderfully lovely?"

"No, I don't!" answered Clara snappishly. "I

dare say she's a plump creature with a high colour —men like fat women with brick-tinted complexions—they think it's healthy. Helen of Troy indeed! Pooh! Lennie must be crazy."

The rest of their drive was very silent,—they were both absorbed in their own reflections. On arriving at the Van Clupps', they found no one at home—not even Marcia—so Lady Winsleigh drove her "dearest Mimsey" back to her own house in Kensington, and there left her with many expressions of tender endearment —then, returning home, proceeded to make an elaborate and brilliant toilette for the enchantment and edification of Sir Francis Lennox that evening. She dined alone, and was ready for her admirer when he called for her in his private hansom, and drove away with him to the theatre, where she was the cynosure of many eyes; meanwhile her husband, Lord Winsleigh, was pressing a good-night kiss on the heated forehead of an excited boy, who, plunging about in his little bed and laughing heartily, was evidently desirous of emulating the gambols of the clown who had delighted him that afternoon at Hengler's.

"Papa! could you stand on your head and shake hands with your foot?" demanded this young rogue, confronting his father with towzled curls and flushed cheeks.

Lord Winsleigh laughed. "Really, Ernest, I don't think I could!" he answered good-naturedly.

"Haven't you talked enough about the circus by this time? I thought you were ready for sleep, otherwise I should not have come up to say good night."

Ernest studied the patient, kind features of his father for a moment, and then slipped penitently under the bed-clothes, settling his restless young head determinedly on the pillow.

"I'm all right now!" he murmured, with a demure, dimpling smile. Then, with a tender upward twinkle of his merry blue eyes, he added, "Good night, papa dear! God bless you!"

A sort of wistful pathos softened the grave lines of Lord Winsleigh's countenance as he bent once more over the little bed, and pressed his bearded lips lightly on the boy's fresh cheek, as cool and soft as a rose-leaf.

"God bless you, little man!" he answered softly, and there was a slight quiver in his calm voice. Then he put out the light and left the room, closing the door after him with careful noiselessness. Descending the broad stairs slowly, his face changed from its late look of tenderness to one of stern and patient coldness, which was evidently its habitual expression. He addressed himself to Briggs, who was lounging aimlessly in the hall.

"Her ladyship is out?"

"Yes, my lord! Gone to the theayter with Sir Francis Lennox."

Lord Winsleigh turned upon him sharply. "I did not ask you, Briggs, *where* she had gone, or *who* accompanied her. Have the goodness to answer my questions simply, without adding useless and unnecessary details."

Briggs's mouth opened a little in amazement at his master's peremptory tone, but he answered promptly—

"Very good, my lord!"

Lord Winsleigh paused a moment, and seemed to consider. Then he said—

"See that her ladyship's supper is prepared in the dining-room. She will most probably return rather late. Should she inquire for me, say I am at the Carlton."

Again Briggs responded, "Very good, my lord!" And, like an exemplary servant as he was, he lingered about the passage while Lord Winsleigh entered his library, and, after remaining there some ten minutes or so, came out again in hat and great coat. The officious Briggs handed him his cane, and inquired—

"'Ansom, my lord?"

"Thanks, no. I will walk."

It was a fine moonlight night, and Briggs stood for some minutes on the steps, airing his shapely calves and watching the tall, dignified figure of his master walking, with the upright, stately bearing which always distinguished him, in the direction of Pall Mall. Park Lane was

full of crowding carriages with twinkling lights, all bound to the different sources of so-called "pleasure" by which the opening of the season is distinguished. Briggs surveyed the scene with lofty indifference, sniffed the cool breeze, and, finding it somewhat chilly, re-entered the house and descended to the servants' hall. Here all the domestics of the Winsleigh household were seated at a large table loaded with hot and savoury viands,—a table presided over by a robust and perspiring lady with a very red face and sturdy arms bare to the elbow.

"Lor', Mr. Briggs!" cried this personage, rising respectfully as he approached, "'ow late you are! Wot 'ave you been a-doin' on? 'Ere I've been a-keepin' your lamb-chops and truffles 'ot all this time, and if they's dried up 'taint my fault, nor that of the hoven, which is as good a hoven as you can wish to bake in. . . ."

She paused breathless, and Briggs smiled blandly.

"Now, Flopsie!" he said in a tone of gentle severity. "Excited again—as usual! It's bad for your 'elth—very bad! *Hif* the chops is dried, your course is plain—cook some more! Not that I am enny ways particular—but chippy meat is bad for a delicate digestion. And you would not make me hill, my Flopsie, would you?"

Whereupon he seated himself, and looked condescendingly round the table. He was too great

a personage to be familiar with such inferior creatures as housemaids, scullery-girls, and menials of that class,—he was only on intimate terms with the cook, Mrs. Flopper, or, as he called her, "Flopsie,"—the coachman, and Lady Winsleigh's own maid, Louise Rénaud, a prim, sallow-faced Frenchwoman, who, by reason of her nationality, was called by all the inhabitants of the kitchen, "mamzelle," as being a name both short, appropriate, and convenient.

On careful examination, the lamb-chops turned out satisfactorily—"chippiness" was an epithet that could not justly be applied to them,—and Mr. Briggs began to eat them leisurely, flavouring them with a glass or two of fine port out of a decanter which he had taken the precaution to bring down from the dining-room sideboard.

"I *ham* late," he then graciously explained—"not that I was detained in enny way by the people upstairs. The gay Clara went out early, but I was absorbed in the evenin' papers—Winsleigh forgot to ask me for them. But he'll see them at his club. He's gone there now on foot—poor fellah!"

"I suppose *she's* with the same party?" grinned the fat Flopsie, as she held a large piece of bacon dipped in vinegar on her fork, preparatory to swallowing it with a gulp.

Briggs nodded gravely. "The same! Not a fine man at all, you know—no leg to speak of, and

therefore no form. Legs—*good* legs—are beauty. Now, Winsleigh's not bad in that particular,—and I dare say Clara can hold her own,—but I wouldn't bet on little Francis."

Flopsie shrieked with laughter till she had a "stitch in her side," and was compelled to restrain her mirth.

"Lor', Mr. Briggs!" she gasped, wiping the moisture from her eyes, "you are a reglar one, aren't you! Mussy on us! you ought to put all wot you say in the papers—you'd make your fortin!"

"Maybe, maybe, Flopsie," returned Briggs with due dignity. "I will not deny that there may be wot is called 'sparkle' in my natur. And 'sparkle' is wot is rekwired in polite literatoor. Look at 'Hedmund' and ''Enery!' Sparkle again,—read their magnificent productions, the *World* and *Truth*,—all sparkle, every line! It is the secret of success, Flopsie—be a sparkler, and you've got everything before you."

Louise Rénaud looked across at him half-defiantly. Her prim, cruel mouth hardened into a tight line.

"To spark-el?" she said—"that is what we call *étinceler*,—*éclater*. Yes, I comprehend! Miladi is one great spark-el! But one must be a very good jewel to spark-el alwàys—yes—yes—not a sham!"

And she nodded a great many times, and ate

her salad very fast. Briggs surveyed her with much complacency.

"You are a talented woman, Mamzelle," he said, "Very talented! I admire your ways—I really do!"

Mamzelle smiled with a gratified air, and Briggs settled his wig, eyeing her anew with fresh interest.

"*Wot* a witness you would be in a divorce case!" he continued enthusiastically. "You'd be in your helement!"

"I should—I should indeed!" exclaimed Mamzelle, with sudden excitement,—then as suddenly growing calm, she made a rapid gesture with her hands—"But there will be no divorce. Milord Winsleigh is a fool!"

Briggs appeared doubtful about this, and meditated for a long time over his third glass of port with the profound gravity of a philosopher.

"No, Mamzelle," he said at last, when he rose from the table to return to his duties upstairs—"No! there I must differ from you. I am a close observer. Wotever Winsleigh's faults,—and I do not deny that they are many,—he is a gentleman—that I *must* admit—and with *hevery* respect for you, Mamzelle—I can assure you he's no fool!"

And with these words Briggs betook himself to the library to arrange the reading-lamp and put the room in order for his master's return, and as he did so, he paused to look at a fine photograph

of Lady Winsleigh that stood on the oak escritoire opposite her husband's arm-chair.

"No," he muttered to himself. "Wotever he thinks of some goings-on, he ain't blind nor deaf —that's certain. And I'd stake my character and purfessional reputation on it—wotever he is, he's no fool!"

For once in his life, Briggs was right. He was generally wrong in his estimate of both persons and things—but it so happened on this particular occasion that he had formed a perfectly correct judgment.

CHAPTER II.

"Could you not drink her gaze like wine?
Yet in its splendour swoon
Into the silence languidly,
As a tune into a tune?"

DANTE ROSSETTI.

ON the morning of the twenty-fifth of May, Thelma, Lady Bruce-Errington, sat at breakfast with her husband in their sunshiny morning-room, fragrant with flowers and melodious with the low piping of a tame thrush in a wide gilded cage, who had the sweet habit of warbling his strophes to himself very softly now and then, before venturing to give them full-voiced utterance. A bright-eyed, feathered poet he was, and an exceeding favourite with his fair mistress, who occasionally leaned back in her low chair to look at him and murmur an encouraging "Sweet, sweet!" which caused the speckled plumage on his plump breast to ruffle up with suppressed emotion and gratitude.

Philip was pretending to read the *Times*, but the huge, self-important printed sheet had not the faintest interest for him,—his eyes wandered over

the top of its columns to the golden gleam of his wife's hair, brightened just then by the sunlight streaming through the window,—and finally he threw it down beside him with a laugh.

"There's no news," he declared. "There never *is* any news!"

Thelma smiled, and her deep-blue eyes sparkled.

"No?" she half inquired—then taking her husband's cup from his hand to re-fill it with coffee, she added, "But I think you do not give yourself time to find the news, Philip. You will never read the papers more than five minutes."

"My dear girl," said Philip gaily, "I am more conscientious than you are, at any rate, for you never read them at all!"

"Ah, but you must remember," she returned gravely, "that is because I do not understand them! I am not clever. They seem to me to be all about such dull things—unless there is some horrible murder or cruelty or accident—and I would rather not hear of these. I do prefer books always—because the books last, and news is never certain—it may not even be true."

Her husband looked at her fondly; his thoughts were evidently very far away from newspapers and their contents.

As she met his gaze the rich colour flushed her soft cheeks and her eyes drooped shyly under their long lashes. Love, with her, had not yet proved an illusion,—a bright toy to be snatched

hastily and played with for a brief while, and then thrown aside as broken and worthless. It seemed to her a most marvellous and splendid gift of God, increasing each day in worth and beauty,—widening upon her soul and dazzling her life in ever new and expanding circles of glory. She felt as if she could never sufficiently understand it,—the passionate adoration Philip lavished upon her filled her with a sort of innocent wonder and gratitude,—while her own overpowering love and worship of him sometimes startled her by its force into a sweet shame and hesitating fear. To her mind he was all that was great, strong, noble, and beautiful—he was her master, her king,—and she loved to pay him homage by her exquisite humility, clinging tenderness, and complete, contented submission. She was neither weak nor timid,—her character, moulded on grand and simple lines of duty, saw the laws of Nature in their true light, and accepted them without question. It seemed to her quite clear that man was the superior,—woman the inferior, creature,—and she could not understand the possibility of any wife not rendering instant and implicit obedience to her husband, even in trifles.

Since her wedding-day no dark cloud had crossed her heaven of happiness, though she had been a little confused and bewildered at first by the wealth and dainty luxury with which Sir Philip had delighted to surround her. She had

been married quietly at Christiania, arrayed in one of her own simple white gowns, with no ornament save a cluster of pale blush-roses, the gift of Lorimer. The ceremony was witnessed by her father and Errington's friends,—and when it was concluded they had all gone on their several ways,—old Güldmar for a "toss" on the Bay of Biscay,—the yacht *Eulalie*, with Lorimer, Macfarlane, and Duprèz on board, back to England, where these gentlemen had separated to their respective homes,—while Errington, with his beautiful bride, and Britta in demure and delighted attendance on her, went straight to Copenhagen. From there they travelled to Hamburg, and through Germany to the Schwarzwald, where they spent their honeymoon at a quiet little hotel in the very heart of the deep-green Forest.

Days of delicious dreaming were these,—days of roaming on the emerald green turf under the stately and odorous pines, listening to the dash of the waterfalls or watching the crimson sunset burning redly through the darkness of the branches, —and in the moonlit evenings sitting under the trees to hear the entrancing music of a Hungarian string-band, which played divine and voluptuous melodies of the land,—"lieder" and "walzer" that swung the heart away on a golden thread of sound to a paradise too sweet to name! Days of high ecstasy and painfully passionate joy!—when "love, love!" palpitated in the air, and struggled

for utterance in the jubilant throats of birds, and whispered wild suggestions in the rustling of the leaves! There were times when Thelma,—lost and amazed and overcome by the strength and sweetness of the nectar held to her innocent lips by a smiling and flame-winged *Eros*,—would wonder vaguely whether she lived indeed, or whether she were not dreaming some gorgeous dream, too brilliant to last? And even when her husband's arms most surely embraced her, and her husband's kiss met hers in all the rapture of victorious tenderness, she would often question herself as to whether she were worthy of such perfect happiness, and she would pray in the depths of her pure heart to be made more deserving of this great and wonderful gift of love—this supreme joy, almost too vast for her comprehension.

On the other hand, Errington's passion for his wife was equally absorbing—she had become the very moving-spring of his existence. His eyes delighted in her beauty,—but more than this, he revelled in and reverenced the crystal-clear purity and exquisite refinement of her soul. Life assumed for him a new form,—studied by the light of Thelma's straightforward simplicity and intelligence, it was no longer, as he had once been inclined to think, a mere empty routine,—it was a treasure of inestimable value fraught with divine meanings. Gradually, the touch of modern cynicism that had at one time threatened to spoil

his nature, dropped away from him like the husk from an ear of corn,—the world arrayed itself in bright and varying colours—there was good—nay, there was glory—in everything.

With these ideas, and the healthy satisfaction they engendered, his heart grew light and joyous,—his eyes more lustrous,—his step gay and elastic,—and his whole appearance was that of man at his best,—man, as God most surely meant him to be—not a rebellious, feebly-repining, sneering wretch, ready to scoff at the very sunlight,—but a being both brave and intelligent, strong and equably balanced in temperament, and not only contented, but absolutely glad to be alive,—glad to feel the blood flowing through the veins,—glad and grateful for the gifts of breathing and sight.

As each day passed, the more close and perfect grew the sympathies of husband and wife,—they were like two notes of a perfect chord, sounding together in sweetest harmony. Naturally, much of this easy and mutual blending of character and disposition arose from Thelma's own gracious and graceful submissiveness,—submissiveness which, far from humiliating her, actually placed her (though she knew it not) on a throne of almost royal power, before which Sir Philip was content to kneel—an ardent worshipper of her womanly sweetness. Always without question or demur, she obeyed his wishes implicitly,—though, as has been before mentioned, she was at first a little

overpowered and startled by the evidences of his wealth, and did not quite know what to do with all the luxuries and gifts he heaped upon her. Britta's worldly prognostications had come true,—the simple gowns her mistress had worn at the Altenfjord were soon discarded for more costly apparel,—though Sir Philip had an affection for his wife's Norwegian costumes, and in his heart thought they were as pretty, if not prettier, than the most perfect triumphs of a Parisian *modiste*.

But in the social world, Fashion, the capricious deity, must be followed, if not wholly, yet in part; and so Thelma's straight, plain garments were laid carefully by as souvenirs of the old days, and were replaced by toilettes of the most exquisite description,—some simple,—some costly,—and it was difficult to say in which of them the lovely wearer looked her best. She herself was indifferent in the matter—she dressed to please Philip, —if he was satisfied, she was happy—she sought nothing further. It was Britta whose merry eyes sparkled with pride and admiration when she saw her "Fröken" arrayed in gleaming silk or sweeping velvets, with the shine of rare jewels in her rippling hair,—it was Britta who took care of all the dainty trifles that gradually accumulated on Thelma's dressing-table,—in fact, Britta had become a very important personage in her own opinion. Dressed neatly in black, with a coquettish muslin apron and cap becomingly frilled, she

was a very taking little maid, with her demure rosy face and rebellious curls, though very different to the usual trained spy whose officious ministrations are deemed so necessary by ladies of position, whose lofty station in life precludes them from the luxury of brushing their own hair. Britta's duties were slight—she invented most of them—yet she was always busy sewing, dusting, packing, or polishing. She was a very wideawake little person, too,—no hint was lost upon her,—and she held her own wherever she went with her bright eyes and sharp tongue. Though secretly in an unbounded state of astonishment at everything new she saw, she was too wise to allow this to be noticed, and feigned the utmost coolness and indifference, even when they went from Germany to Paris, where the brilliancy and luxury of the shops almost took away her breath for sheer wonderment.

In Paris, Thelma's wardrobe was completed—a certain Madame Rosine, famous for "artistic arrangements," was called into requisition, and viewing with a professional eye the superb figure and majestic carriage of her new customer, rose to the occasion in all her glory, and resolved that Miladi Bruce-Errington's dresses should be the wonder and envy of all who beheld them.

"For," said Madame, with a grand air, "it is to do me justice. That form so magnificent is worth draping,—it will support my work to the

best advantage. And persons without figures will hasten to me and entreat me for costumes, and will think that if I dress them I can make them look as well as Miladi. And they will pay!" —Madame shook her head with much shrewdness —"*Mon Dieu!* they will pay!—and that they still look frightful will not be my fault."

And undoubtedly Madame surpassed her usual skill in all she did for Thelma,—she took such pains, and was so successful in all her designs, that "Miladi," who did not as a rule show more than a very ordinary interest in her toilette, found it impossible not to admire the artistic taste, harmonious colouring, and exquisite fit of the few choice gowns supplied to her from the "Maison Rosine"—and only on one occasion had she any discussion with the celebrated *modiste*. This was when Madame herself, with much pride, brought home an evening dress of the very palest and tenderest sea-green silk, showered with pearls, and embroidered in silver, a perfect *chef-d'œuvre* of the dressmaker's art. The skirt, with its billowy train and peeping folds of delicate lace, pleased Thelma,—but she could not understand the bodice, and she held that very small portion of the costume in her hand with an air of doubt and wonderment. At last she turned her grave blue eyes inquiringly on Madame.

"It is not finished?" she asked. "Where is the upper part of it and the sleeves?"

Madame Rosine gesticulated with her hands and smiled.

"Miladi, there is no more!" she declared. "Miladi will perceive it is for the evening wear—it is *décolletée*—it is to show to everybody Miladi's most beautiful white neck and arms. The effect will be ravishing!"

Thelma's face grew suddenly grave—almost stern.

"You must be very wicked!" she said severely, to the infinite amazement of the vivacious Rosine. "You think I would show myself to people half clothed? How is it possible! I would not so disgrace myself! It would bring shame to my husband!"

Madame was almost speechless with surprise. What strange lady was this who was so dazzlingly beautiful and graceful, and yet so ignorant of the world's ways? She stared,—but was soon on the defensive.

"Miladi is in a little error!" she said rapidly and with soft persuasiveness. "It is *la mode*. Miladi has perhaps lived in a country where the fashions are different. But if she will ask the most amiable Sieur Bruce-Errington, she will find that her dress is quite in keeping with *les convenances*."

A pained blush crimsoned Thelma's fair cheek. "I do not like to ask my husband such a thing," she said slowly, "but I must. For I could not

wear this dress without shame. I cannot think he would wish me to appear in it as you have made it—but——" She paused, and taking up the objectionable bodice, she added gently—"You will kindly wait here, madame, and I will see what Sir Philip says."

And she retired, leaving the *modiste* in a state of much astonishment, approaching resentment. The idea was outrageous,—a woman with such divinely fair skin,—a woman with the bosom of a Venus, and arms of a shape to make sculptors rave, —and yet she actually wished to hide these beauties from the public gaze! It was ridiculous—utterly ridiculous,—and Madame sat fuming impatiently, and sniffing the air in wonder and scorn. Meanwhile Thelma, with flushing cheeks and lowered eyes, confided her difficulty to Philip, who surveyed the shocking little bodice she brought for his inspection with a gravely amused, but very tender, smile.

"There certainly doesn't seem much of it, does there, darling?" he said. "And so you don't like it?"

"No," she confessed frankly—"I think I should feel quite undressed in it. I often wear just a little opening at the throat—but this——! Still, Philip, I must not displease you—and I will always wear what you wish, even if it is uncomfortable to myself."

"Look here, my pet," and he encircled her

waist fondly with his arm, "Rosine is quite right. The thing's perfectly fashionable,—and there isn't a woman in society who wouldn't be perfectly charmed with it. But your ideas are better than Rosine's and all society's put together. Obey your own womanly instinct, Thelma!"

"But what do *you* wish?" she asked earnestly —"You must tell me. It is to please you that I live."

He kissed her. "You want me to issue a command about this affair?" he said half laughingly.

She smiled up into his eyes. "Yes!—And I will obey!"

"Very well! Now listen!" and he held her by both hands, and looked with sudden gravity into her sweet face—"Thelma, my wife, thus sayeth your lord and master,—Despise the vulgar indecencies of fashion, and you will gratify me more than words can say;—keep your pure and beautiful self sacred from the profaning gaze of the multitude,—sacred to me and my love for you, and I shall be the proudest man living! Finally,"—and he smiled again—"give Rosine back this effort at a bodice, and tell her to make something more in keeping with the laws of health and modesty. And, Thelma—one more kiss! You are a darling!"

She laughed softly and left him, returning at once to the irate dressmaker who waited for her.

"I am sorry," she said very sweetly, "to have

called you wicked! You see, I did not understand! But though this style of dress is fashionable, I do not wish to wear it—so you will please make me another bodice, with a small open square at the throat, and elbow-sleeves,—and you will lose nothing at all—for I shall pay you for this one just the same. And you must quite pardon me for my mistake and hasty words!"

Miladi's manner was so gracious and winning, that Madame Rosine found it impossible not to smile in a soothed and mollified way,—and though she deeply regretted that so beautiful a neck and arms were not to be exposed to public criticism, she resigned herself to the inevitable, and took away the offending bodice, replacing it in a couple of days by one much prettier and more becoming by reason of its perfect modesty.

On leaving Paris, Sir Philip had taken his wife straight home to his fine old Manor in Warwickshire. Thelma's delight in her new abode was unbounded—the stately oaks that surrounded it,—the rose-gardens, the conservatories, —the grand rooms, with their fine tapestries, oak furniture, and rare pictures,—the splendid library, the long, lofty drawing-rooms, furnished and decorated after the style of Louis Quinze,—all filled her with a tender pride and wistful admiration. This was Philip's home! and she was here to make it bright and glad for him!—she could imagine no fairer fate. The old servants of the

place welcomed their new mistress with marked respect and evident astonishment at her beauty, though, when they knew her better, they marvelled still more at her exceeding gentleness and courtesy. The housekeeper, a stately white-haired dame, who had served the former Lady Errington, declared she was "an angel"—while the butler swore profoundly that "he knew what a queen was like at last!"

The whole household was pervaded with an affectionate eagerness to please her, though, perhaps, the one most dazzled by her entrancing smile and sweet consideration for his comfort was Edward Neville, Sir Philip's private secretary and librarian,—a meek, mild-featured man of some five and forty years old, whose stooping shoulders, grizzled hair, and weak eyes gave him an appearance of much greater age. Thelma was particularly kind to Neville, having heard his history from her husband. It was brief and sad. He had married a pretty young girl whom he had found earning a bare subsistence as a singer in provincial music-halls,—loving her, he had pitied her unprotected state, and had rescued her from the life she led—but after six months of comparative happiness, she had suddenly deserted him, leaving no clue as to where or why she had gone. His grief for her loss weighed heavily upon his mind—he brooded incessantly upon it—and though his profession was that of a music-master and

organist, he grew so abstracted and inattentive to the claims of the few pupils he had, that they fell away from him one by one—and, after a bit, he lost his post as organist to the village church as well. This smote him deeply, for he was passionately fond of music, and was, moreover, a fine player,—and it was at this stage of his misfortunes that he met by chance Bruce-Errington. Philip, just then, was almost broken-hearted—his father and mother had died suddenly within a week of one another,—and he, finding the blank desolation of his home unbearable, was anxious to travel abroad for a time, so soon as he could find some responsible person in whose hands to leave the charge of the Manor, with its invaluable books and pictures, during his absence.

Hearing Neville's history through a mutual friend, he decided, with his usual characteristic impulse, that here was the very man for him—a gentleman by birth, rumoured to be an excellent scholar,—and he at once offered him the post he had in view,—that of private secretary at a salary of £200 per annum. The astonished Neville could not at first believe in his good fortune, and began to stammer forth his gratitude with trembling lips and moistening eyes,—but Errington cut him short by declaring the whole thing settled, and desiring him to enter on his duties at once. He was forthwith installed in his position,—a highly enviable one for a man of his dreamy

and meditative turn of mind. To him, literature and music were precious as air and light,—he handled the rare volumes on the Errington bookshelves with lingering tenderness, and often pored over some difficult manuscript or dusty folio till long past midnight, almost forgetful of his griefs in the enchantment thus engendered. Nor did he lack his supreme comforter, music,—there was a fine organ at the lower end of the long library, and seated at his beloved instrument, he wiled away many an hour,—steeping his soul in the divine and solemn melodies of Palestrina and Pergolesi, till the cruel sorrow that had darkened his life seemed nothing but a bad dream, and the face of his wife as he had first known it, fair, trustful, and plaintive, floated before his eyes unchanged, and arousing in him the old foolish throbbing emotions of rapture and passion that had gladdened the bygone days.

He never lost the hope of meeting her again, and from time to time he renewed his search for her, though all uselessly—he studied the daily papers with an almost morbid anxiety lest he should see the notice of her death—and he would even await each post with a heart beating more rapidly than usual, in case there should be some letter from her, imploring forgiveness, explaining everything, and summoning him once more to her side. He found a true and keenly sympathizing friend in Sir Philip, to whom he

became profoundly attached,—to satisfy his wishes, to forward his interests, to attend to his affairs with punctilious exactitude—all this gave Neville the supremest happiness. He felt some slight doubt and anxiety, when he first received the sudden announcement of his patron's marriage,—but all forebodings as to the character and disposition of the new Lady Bruce-Errington fled like mist before sunshine, when he saw Thelma's fair face and felt her friendly hand-clasp.

Every morning on her way to the breakfast-room, she would look in at the door of his little study, which adjoined the library, and he learned to watch for the first glimmer of her dress, and to listen for her bright "Good morning, Mr. Neville!" with a sensation of the keenest pleasure. It was a sort of benediction on the whole day. A proud man was he when she asked him to give her lessons on the organ,—and never did he forget the first time he heard her sing. He was playing an exquisite "Ave Maria," by Stradella, and she, standing by her husband's side was listening, when she suddenly exclaimed—

"Why, we used to sing that at Arles!"—and her rich, round voice pealed forth clear, solemn, and sweet, following with pure steadiness the sustained notes of the organ. Neville's heart thrilled,—he heard her with a sort of breathless wonder and rapture, and when she ceased, it seemed as though heaven had closed upon him.

"One cannot praise such a voice as that!" he said. "It would be a kind of sacrilege. It is divine!"

After this, many were the pleasant musical evenings they all passed together in the grand old library, and,—as Mrs. Rush-Marvelle had so indignantly told her husband,—no visitors were invited to the Manor during that winter. Errington was perfectly happy—he wanted no one but his wife, and the idea of entertaining a party of guests who would most certainly interfere with his domestic enjoyment, seemed almost abhorrent to him. The county-people called,—but missed seeing Thelma, for during the daytime she was always out with her husband taking long walks, and rambling excursions to the different places hallowed by Shakespeare's presence,—and when she, instructed by Sir Philip, called on the county-people they also seemed to be never at home.

And so, as yet, she had made no acquaintances, and now that she had been married eight months and had come to London, the same old story repeated itself. People called on her in the afternoon just at the time when she went out driving, —when she returned their visits, she, in her turn, found them absent. She did not as yet understand the mystery of having "a day" on which to receive visitors in shoals—a day on which to drink unlimited tea, talk platitudes, and be utterly bored and exhausted at the end thereof—in fact,

she did not see the necessity of knowing many people,—her husband was all-sufficient for her,—to be in his society was all she cared for. She left her card at different houses because he told her to do so, but this social duty amused her immensely.

"It is like a game!" she declared, laughing, "some one comes and leaves these little cards which explain who *they* are, on *me*,—then I go and leave *my* little cards and yours, explaining who *we* are on that some one—and we keep on doing this, yet we never see each other by any chance! It is so droll!"

Errington did not feel called upon to explain what was really the fact,—namely, that none of the ladies who had left cards on his wife had given her the option of their "at home" day on which to call,—he did not think it necessary to tell her what he knew very well, that his "set," both in county and town, had resolved to "snub" her in every petty fashion they could devise,—that he had already received several invitations which, as they did not include her, he had left unanswered,—and that the only house to which she had as yet been really asked in proper form was that of Lady Winsleigh. He was more amused than vexed at the resolute stand made by the so-called "leaders" of society against her, knowing as he did, most thoroughly, how she must conquer them all in the end. She had been seen nowhere as yet but in the Park, and Philip had good reason to be

contented with the excitement her presence had created there,—but he was a little astonished at Lady Winsleigh's being the first to extend a formal welcome to his unknown bride. Her behaviour seemed to him a little suspicious.—for he certainly could not disguise from himself that she had at one time been most violently and recklessly in love with him. He recollected one or two most painful scenes he had had with her, in which he had endeavoured to recall her to a sense of the duty she owed to her husband,—and his face often flushed with vexation when he thought of her wild and wicked abandonment of despair, her tears, her passion, and distracted, dishonouring words. Yet she was the very woman who now came forward in the very front of society to receive his wife!—he could not quite understand it. After all, he was a man,—and the sundry artful tricks and wiles of fashionable ladies were, naturally, beyond him. Thelma had never met Lady Winsleigh—not even for a passing glance in the Park,—and when she received the invitation for the grand reception at Winsleigh House, she accepted it, because her husband wished her so to do, not that she herself anticipated any particular pleasure from it. When the day came round at last she scarcely thought of it, till at the close of their pleasant breakfast *tête-à-tête* described at the commencement of this chapter, Philip suddenly said,—

"By-the-by, Thelma, I have sent to the bank for the Errington diamonds. They'll be here presently. I want you to wear them to-night."

Thelma looked puzzled and inquiring.

"To-night? What is it that we do? I forget! Oh! now I know—it is to go to Lady Winsleigh. What will it be like, Philip?"

"Well, there'll be heaps of people all cramming and crowding up the stairs and down them again, —you'll see all those women who have called on you, and you'll be introduced to them,—I dare say there'll be some bad music and an indigestible supper—and—and—that's all!"

She laughed and shook her head reproachfully.

"I cannot believe you, my naughty boy!" she said, rising from her seat and kneeling beside him with arms round his neck, and soft eyes gazing lovingly into his. "You are nearly as bad as that very bad Mr. Lorimer, who will always see strange vexations in everything! I am quite sure Lady Winsleigh will not have crowds up and down her stairs,—that would be bad taste. And if she has music, it will be good—and she would not give her friends a supper to make them ill."

Philip did not answer. He was studying every delicate tint in his wife's dazzling complexion and seemed absorbed.

"Wear that one gown you got from Worth," he said abruptly. "I like it—it suits you."

"Of course I will wear it if you wish," she answered, laughing still. "But why? What does it matter? You want me to be something very splendid in dress to-night?"

Philip drew a deep breath. "I want you to eclipse every woman in the room!" he said with remarkable emphasis.

She grew rather pensive. "I do not think that would be pleasant," she said gravely. "Besides, it is impossible. And it would be wrong to wish me to make every one else dissatisfied with themselves. That is not like you, my Philip!"

He touched with tender fingers the great glistening coil of hair that was twisted up at the top of her graceful head.

"Ah, darling! You don't know what a world it is, and what very queer people there are in it! Never mind! . . . don't bother yourself about it. You'll have a good bird's-eye view of society to-night, and you shall tell me afterwards how you like it. I shall be curious to know what you think of Lady Winsleigh."

"She is beautiful, is she not?"

"Well, she is considered so by most of her acquaintances, and by herself," he returned with a smile.

"I do like to see very pretty faces," said Thelma warmly, "it is as if one looked at pictures. Since I have been in London I have seen so many of them—it is quite pleasant. Yet

none of these lovely ladies seem to me as if they were really happy or strong in health."

"Half of them have got nervous diseases and all sorts of things wrong with them from overmuch tea and tight lacing," replied Errington, "and the few who *are* tolerably healthy are too bouncing by half, going in for hunting and such-like amusements till they grow blowsy and fat, and coarse as tom-boys or grooms. They can never hit the *juste milieu.* Well!" and he rose from the breakfast-table. "I'll go and see Neville and attend to business. We'll drive out this afternoon for some fresh air, and afterwards you must rest, my pet—for you'll find an 'at home' more tiring than climbing a mountain in Norway."

He kissed, and left her to her usual occupations, of which she had many, for she had taken great pains to learn all the details of the work in the Errington establishment,—in fact, she went every morning to the little room where Mistress Parton, the housekeeper, received her with much respect and affection, and duly instructed her on every point of the domestic management and daily expenditure, so that she was thoroughly acquainted with everything that went on.

She had very orderly quiet ways of her own, and though thoughtful for the comfort and well-being of the lowest servant in her household she very firmly checked all extravagance and waste,

yet in such a gentle unobtrusive manner that her control was scarcely felt—though her husband at once recognized it in the gradually decreasing weekly expenses, while to all appearance, things were the same as ever. She had plenty of clear, good common sense,—she saw no reason why she should waste her husband's wealth simply because it was abundant,—so that under her mild sway, Sir Philip found himself getting richer without any trouble on his own part. His house assumed an air of lighter and more tasteful elegance,—flowers, always arranged by Thelma herself, adorned the rooms,—birds filled the great conservatory with their delicious warblings, and gradually that strange fairy-sweet fabric known as "Home" rose smilingly around him. Formerly he had much disliked his stately town mansion—he had thought it dull and cold—almost gloomy,—but now he considered it charming, and wondered he had missed so many of its good points before.

And when the evening for Lady Winsleigh's "crush" came,—he looked regretfully round the lovely luxurious drawing-room with its bright fire, deep easy chairs, books, and grand piano, and wished he and his wife could remain at home in peace. He glanced at his watch—it was ten o'clock. There was no hurry—he had not the least intention of arriving at Winsleigh House too early. He knew what the effect of Thelma's entrance would be—and he smiled as he thought

of it. He was waiting for her now,—he himself was ready in full evening dress—and remarkably handsome he looked. He walked up and down restlessly for a minute or so,—then taking up a volume of Keats, he threw himself into an easy chair and soon became absorbed. His eyes were still on the printed page, when a light touch on his shoulder startled him,—a soft, half-laughing voice inquired—

"Philip! Do I please you?"

He sprang up and faced her,—but for a moment could not speak. The perfection of her beauty had never ceased to arouse his wonder and passionate admiration,—but on this night, as she stood before him, arrayed in a simple, trailing robe of ivory-tinted velvet, with his family diamonds flashing in a tiara of light on her hair, glistening against the whiteness of her throat and rounded arms, she looked angelically lovely—so radiant, so royal, and withal so innocently happy, that, wistfully gazing at her, and thinking of the social clique into which she was about to make her entry, he wondered vaguely whether he was not wrong to take so pure and fair a creature among the false glitter and reckless hypocrisy of modern fashion and folly. And so he stood silent, till Thelma grew anxious.

"Ah, you are not satisfied!" she said plaintively. "I am not as you wish! There is something wrong."

He drew her closely into his arms, kissing her with an almost pathetic tenderness.

"Thelma, my love, my sweet one!" and his strong voice trembled. "You do not know—how should you? what I think of you! Satisfied? Pleased? Good Heavens—what little words those are to express my feelings! I can tell you how you look, for nothing can ever make *you* vain. You are beautiful! . . .—you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, and you look your very best to-night. But you are more than beautiful—you are good and pure and true, while society is—— But why should I destroy your illusions? Only, my wife,—we have been all in all to each other,—and now I have a foolish feeling as if things were going to be different—as if we should not be so much together—and I wish—I wish to God I could keep you all to myself without anybody's interference!"

She looked at him in wonder, though she smiled.

"But you have changed, my boy, since the morning," she said. "Then you did wish me to be particular in dress,—and to wear your jewels, for this Lady Winsleigh. Now your eyes are sad, and you seem as if you would rather not go at all. Well, is it not easy to remain at home? I will take off these fine things, and we will sit together and read. Shall it be so?"

He laughed. "I believe you would do it if I asked you!" he said.

"But, of course! I am quite happy alone with you. I care nothing for this party,—what is it to me if you do not wish to go?"

He kissed her again. "Thelma, don't spoil me too much! If you let me have my own way to such an extent, who knows what an awful domestic tyrant I may become! No, dear—we must go to-night—there's no help for it. You see we've accepted the invitation, and it's no use being churlish. Besides, after all"—he gazed at her admiringly—"I want them to see my Norwegian rose! Come along! The carriage is waiting."

They passed out into the hall, where Britta was in attendance with a long cloak of pale-blue plush lined with white fur, in which she tenderly enveloped her beloved "Fröken," her rosy face beaming with affectionate adoration as she glanced from the fair diamond-crowned head down to the point of the small pearl-embroidered shoe that peeped beneath the edge of the rich, sheeny white robe, and saw that nothing was lacking to the most perfect toilette that ever woman wore.

"Good night, Britta!" said Thelma kindly. "You must not sit up for me. You will be tired."

Britta smiled—it was evident she meant to outwatch the stars, if necessary, rather than allow her mistress to be unattended on her return. But she said nothing—she waited at the door while Philip assisted his wife into the carriage—and

still stood musingly under the wide portico, after they had driven away.

"Hadn't you better come in, Miss Britta?" said the butler respectfully,—he had a great regard for her ladyship's little maid.

Britta, recalled to herself, started, turned, and re-entered the hall.

"There will be many fine folks there to-night, I suppose?" she asked.

The butler rubbed his nose perplexedly. "Fine folks? At Winsleigh House? Well, as far as clothes go, I dare say there will. But there'll be no one like her ladyship—no one!" And he shook his grey head emphatically.

"Of course not!" said Britta, with a sort of triumphant defiance. "We know that very well, Morris! There's no one like her ladyship anywhere in the wide world! But I tell you what—I think a great many people will be jealous of her."

Morris smiled. "You may take your oath of that, Miss Britta," he said with placid conviction. "Jealous! Jealous isn't the word for it! Why," and he surveyed Britta's youthful countenance with fatherly interest, "you're only a child as it were, and you don't know the world much. Now, I've been five and twenty years in this family, and I knew Sir Philip's mother, the Lady Eulalie—he named his yacht after her. Ah! she was a sweet creature—she came from Austria, and

she was as dark as her present ladyship is fair. Wherever she went, I tell you, the women were ready to cry for spite and envy of her good looks —and they would say anything against her they could invent. That's the way they go on sometimes in society you know."

"As bad as in Bosekop," murmured Britta, more to herself than to him, "only London is a larger place." Then raising her voice again, she said, "Perhaps there will be some people wicked enough to hate her ladyship, Morris?"

"I shouldn't wonder," said Morris philosophically. "I shouldn't wonder at all! There's a deal of hate about one way or another,—and if a lady is as beautiful as an angel, and cuts out everybody wherever she goes, why you can't expect the other ladies to be very fond of her. 'Tisn't in human nature—at least not in feminine human nature. Men don't care much about their looks one way or the other, unless they're young chaps—then one has a little patience with them and they come all right."

But Britta had become meditative again. She went slowly up into her mistress's room and began arranging the few trifles that had been left in disorder.

"Just fancy!"—she said to herself—"someone may hate the Fröken even in London just as they hated her in Bosekop, because she is so unlike everybody else. *I* shall keep my eyes

open,—and *I* shall soon find out any wickedness against her! My beautiful, dear darling! I believe the world is a cruel place after all,—but *she* shan't be made unhappy in it, if I can help it!"

And with this emphatic declaration, she kissed a little shoe of Thelma's that she was just putting by—and, smoothing her curls, went down to her supper.

CHAPTER III.

"Such people there are living and flourishing in the world,—Faithless, Hopeless, Charityless,—let us have at them, dear friends, with might and main!"—THACKERAY.

WHO can adequately describe the thrilling excitement attending an aristocratic "crush,"—an extensive, sweeping-off-of-old-scores "at home,"—that scene of bewildering confusion which might be appropriately set forth to the minds of the vulgar in the once-popular ditty, "Such a getting-upstairs I never did see!" Who can paint in sufficiently brilliant colours the mere *outside* of a house thus distinguished by this strange festivity, in which there is no actual pleasure,—this crowding of carriages—this shouting of small boys and policemen?—who can, in words, delineate the various phases of lofty indignation and offence on the countenances of pompous coachmen, forced into contention with vulgar but good-natured "cabbys"—for right of way? . . . who can sufficiently set forth the splendours of a striped awning avenue, lined on both sides with a col-

lection of tropical verdure, hired for the occasion at so much per dozen pots, and illuminated with Chinese lanterns! Talk of orange groves in Italy and the languid light of a southern moon! What are they compared to the marvels of striped awning? Mere trees—mere moonlight—(poor products of Nature!) do not excite either wonder or envy—but, strange to say, an awning avenue invariably does! As soon as it is erected in all its bland suggestiveness, no matter at what house, a small crowd of street-arabs and nursemaids collect to stare at it,—and when tired of staring, pass and repass under it with peculiar satisfaction, —the beggar, starving for a crust, lingers doubtfully near it, and ventures to inquire of the influenza-smitten crossing-sweeper whether it is a wedding or a party? And if Awning Avenue means matrimony, the beggar waits to see the guests come out,—if, on the contrary, it stands for some evening festivity, he goes, resolving to return at the appointed hour, and try if he cannot persuade one "swell" at least to throw him a penny for his night's supper. Yes—a great many people endure sharp twinges of discontent at the sight of Awning Avenue,—people who can't afford to give parties, and who wish they could,—pretty, sweet girls who never go to a dance in their lives, and long with all their innocent hearts for a glimpse,—just *one* glimpse!—of what seems to them inexhaustible, fairy-like delight,—lonely

folks, who imagine in their simplicity, that all who are privileged to pass between the lines of hired tropical foliage aforementioned, must perforce be the best and most united of friends—hungry men and women who picture, with watering mouths, the supper-table that lies *beyond* the awning, laden with good things, the very names of which they are hopelessly ignorant,—while now and then a stern, dark-browed Thinker or two may stalk by and metaphorically shake his fist at all the waste, extravagance, useless luxury, humbug, and hypocrisy Awning Avenue usually symbolizes, and may mutter in his beard like an old-fashioned tragedian, "A time *will* come!" Yes, Sir Thinker!—it will most undoubtedly—it *must*—but not through you—not through any mere human agency. Modern society contains within itself the seed of its own destruction,—the most utter Nihilist that ever swore deadly oath need but contain his soul in patience and allow the seed to ripen. For God's justice is as a circle that slowly surrounds an evil and as slowly closes on it with crushing and resistless force,—and feverish, fretting humanity, however nobly inspired, can do nothing either to hasten or retard the round, perfect, absolute and Divine Law. So let the babes of the world play on, and let us not frighten them with stories of earthquakes, —they are miserable enough as it is, believe it!—their toys are so brittle, and snap in their feeble

hands so easily, that one is inclined to pity them! And Awning Avenue, with its borrowed verdure and artificial light, is frequently erected for the use of some of the most wretched among the children of the earth,—children who have trifled with and lost everything,—love, honour, hope, and faith, and who are travelling rapidly to the grave with no consolation save a few handfuls of base coin, which they must, perforce, leave behind them at the last.

So it may be that the crippled crossing-sweeper outside Winsleigh House is a very great deal happier than the master of that stately mansion. He has a new broom,—and Master Ernest Winsleigh has given him two oranges, and a rather bulky stick of sugar candy. He is a *protégé* of Ernest's—that bright handsome boy considers it a "jolly shame"—to have only one leg,—and has said so with much emphasis,—and though the little sweeper himself has never regarded his affliction quite in that light, he is exceedingly grateful for the young gentleman's patronage and sympathy thus frankly expressed. And on this particular night of the grand reception he stands, leaning on his broom and munching his candy, a delighted spectator of the scene in Park Lane,—the splendid equipages, the prancing horses, the glittering liveries, the excited cabmen, the magnificent toilettes of the ladies, the solemn and resigned deportment of the

gentlemen,—and he envies none of them—not he! Why should he? His oranges are in his pocket—untouched as yet—and it is doubtful whether the crowding guests at the Winsleigh supper-table shall find anything there to yield them such entire enjoyment as he will presently take in his humble yet refreshing desert. And he is pleased as a child at a pantomime—the Winsleigh "at home" is a show that amuses him,—and he makes sundry remarks on "'im" and "'er" in a meditative *sotto-voce.* He peeps up Awning Avenue heedless of the severe eye of the policeman on guard,—he sweeps the edge of the crimson felt foot-cloth tenderly with his broom,—and if he has a desire ungratified, it is that he might take a peep just for a minute inside the front door, and see how "they're all a'goin' it!,"

And how *are* they a'goin' it? Well, not very hilariously, if one may judge by the aspect of the gentlemen in the hall and on the stairs,—gentlemen of serious demeanour, who are leaning, as though exhausted, against the banisters, with a universal air of profound weariness and dissatisfaction. Some of these are young fledglings of manhood,—callow birds who, though by no means innocent,—are more or less inexperienced,—and who have fluttered hither to the snare of Lady Winsleigh's "at home," half expecting to be allowed to make love to their hostess, and so have something to boast of afterwards,—others are of the middle-aged

complacent type who, though infinitely bored, have condescended to "look in" for ten minutes or so, to see if there are any pretty women worth the honour of their criticism—others again (and these are the most unfortunate) are the "nobodies"—or husbands, fathers, and brothers of "beauties," whom they have dutifully escorted to the scene of triumph, in which they, unlucky wights! are certainly not expected to share. A little desultory conversation goes on among these stair-loungers,—conversation mingled with much dreary yawning, — a trained opera-singer is shaking forth chromatic roulades and trills in the great drawing-room above,—there is an incessant stream of people coming and going,—there is the rustle of silk and satin,—perfume shaken out of lace kerchiefs and bouquets oppresses the warm air,—the heat is excessive,—and there is a never-ending monotonous hum of voices, only broken at rare intervals by the "society laugh"—that unmeaning giggle on the part of the women, — that strained "ha, ha, ha!" on the part of the men, which is but the faint ghostly echo of the farewell voice of true mirth.

Presently, out of the ladies cloak-room come two fascinating figures—the one plump and matronly, with grey hair and a capacious neck glittering with diamonds,—the other a slim girl in pale pink, with dark eyes and a ravishing complexion,

for whom the lazy gentlemen on the stairs make immediate and respectful room.

"How d'ye do, Mrs. Van Clupp?" says one of the loungers.

"Glad to see you, Miss Marcia!" says another, a sandy-haired young man, with a large gardenia in his button-hole, and a glass in his eye.

At the sound of his voice Miss Marcia stops and regards him with a surprised smile. She is very pretty, is Marcia,—bewitchingly pretty,—and she has an air of demure grace and modesty about her that is perfectly charming. Why! oh, why does she not remain in that sylph-like attitude of questioning silence? But she speaks—and the charm is broken.

"Waal now! Dew tell!" she exclaims. "I thought yew were in Pa-ar—is! Ma, would yew have concluded to find Lord Algy here? This is *too* lovely! If I'd known *yew* were coming I'd have stopped at home—yes, I would—that's so!"

And she nods her little head, crowned with its glossy braids of chestnut hair, in a very coquettish manner, while her mother, persistently beaming a stereotyped company smile on all around her, begins to ascend the stairs, beckoning her daughter to follow. Marcia does so, and Lord Algernon Masherville escorts her.

"You—you didn't mean that?" he stammers rather feebly—"You—you don't mind my being here do you? I'm—I'm *awfully* glad to see you

again, you know—and—er—all that sort of thing!"

Marcia darts a keen glance at him,—the glance of an observant clear-headed magpie.

"Oh yes! I dare say!" she remarks with airy scorn. "'Spect *me* to believe *yew!* Waal! Did yew have a good time in Pa-ar—is?"

"Fairly so," answers Lord Masherville indifferently. "I only came back two days ago. Lady Winsleigh met me by chance at the theatre, and asked me to look in to-night for 'some fun' she said. Have you any idea what she meant?"

"Of course!" says the fair New Yorker, with a little nasal laugh,—"Don't *yew* know? We're all here to see the fisherwoman from the wilds of Norway,—the creature Sir Philip Errington married last year. I conclude she'll give us fits all round, don't yew?"

Lord Masherville, at this, appears to hesitate. His eye-glass troubles him, and he fidgets with its black string. He is not intellectual—he is the most vacillating, most meek and timid of mortals—but he is a gentleman in his own poor fashion, and has a sort of fluttering chivalry about him, which, though feeble, is better than none.

"I really cannot tell you, Miss Marcia," he replies almost nervously. "I hear—at the Club,—that—that Lady Bruce-Errington is a great beauty."

"Dew tell!" shrieks Marcia, with a burst of

laughter. "Is she really though! But I guess her looks won't mend her grammar any way!"

He makes no reply, as by this time they have reached the crowded drawing-room, where Lady Winsleigh, radiant in ruby velvet and rose-brilliants, stands receiving her guests, with a cool smile and nod for mere acquaintances,—and a meaning flash of her dark eyes for her intimates, and a general air of haughty insolence and perfect self-satisfaction pervading her from head to foot. Close to her is her husband, grave, courtly, and kind to all comers, and fulfilling his duty as host to perfection,—still closer is Sir Francis Lennox, who in the pauses of the incoming tide of guests finds occasion to whisper trifling nothings in her tiny white ear, and even once ventures to arrange more tastefully a falling cluster of pale roses that rests lightly on the brief shoulder-strap (called by courtesy a sleeve) which keeps her ladyship's bodice in place.

Mrs. Rush-Marvelle is here too, in all her glory, — her good-humoured countenance and small nose together beam with satisfaction,—her voluminous train of black satin showered with jet gets in everybody's way,—her ample bosom heaves like the billowy sea, somewhat above the boundary line of transparent lace that would fain restrain it—but in this particular she is prudence itself compared with her hostess, whose charms are exhibited with the unblushing frankness of a

ballet-girl,—and whose example is followed, it must be confessed, by most of the women in the room. Is Mr. Rush-Marvelle here? Oh yes—after some little trouble we discover him,—squeezed against the wall and barricaded by the grand piano,—in company with a large album, over which he pores, feigning an almost morbid interest in the portraits of persons he has never seen and, never will see. Beside him is a melancholy short man with long hair and pimples, who surveys the increasing crowd in the room with an aspect that is almost tragic. Once or twice he eyes Mr. Marvelle dubiously as though he would speak—and, finally, he *does* speak, tapping that album-entranced gentleman on the arm with an energy that is somewhat startling.

"It is to blay I am here!" he announces. "To blay ze biano! I am great artist!" He rolls his eyes wildly and with a sort of forced calmness proceeds to enumerate on his fingers—"Baris, Vienna, Rome, Berlin, St. Betersburg—all know me! All resbect me! See!" And he holds out his button-hole in which there is a miniature red ribbon. "From ze Emberor! Kaiser Wilhelm!" He exhibits a ring on his little finger. "From ze Tsar!" Another rapid movement and a pompous gold watch is thrust before the bewildered gaze of his listener. "From my bubils in Baris! I am bianist—I am here to blay!"

And raking his fingers through his long locks, he stares defiantly around him. Mr. Rush-Marvelle is a little frightened. This is an eccentric personage—he must be soothed. Evidently he must be soothed!

"Yes, yes, I quite understand!" he says, nodding persuasively at the excited genius. "You are here to play. Exactly! Yes, yes! We shall all have the pleasure of hearing you presently. Delightful, I'm sure! You are the celebrated Herr——?"

"Machtenklinken," adds the pianist haughtily. "Ze celebrate Machtenklinken!"

"Yes—oh—er,—yes!" And Mr. Marvelle grapples desperately with this terrible name. "Oh—er—yes! I—er know you by reputation Herr—er—Machten——. Oh, er—yes! Pray excuse me for a moment!"

And thankfully catching the commanding eye of his wife, he scrambles hastily away from the piano and joins her. She is talking to the Van Clupps, and she wants him to take away Mr. Van Clupp, a white-headed, cunning-looking old man, for a little conversation, in order that she may be free to talk over certain naughty bits of scandal with Mrs. Van Clupp and Marcia.

To-night there is no place to sit down in all the grand extent of the Winsleigh drawing-rooms, —puffy old dowagers occupy the sofas, ottomans, and chairs, and the largest and most brilliant

portion of the assemblage are standing, grinning into each other's faces with praiseworthy and polite pertinacity, and talking as rapidly as though their lives depended on how many words they could utter within the space of two minutes. Mrs. Rush-Marvelle, Mrs. Van Clupp and Marcia make their way slowly through the gabbling, pushing, smirking crowd till they form a part of the little *coterie* immediately round Lady Winsleigh, to whom, at the first opportunity, Mrs. Marvelle whispers—

"Have they come?"

"The modern Paris and the new Helen?" laughs Lady Clara, with a shrug of her snowy shoulders. "No, not yet. Perhaps they wont turn up at all! Marcia dear, you look *quite* charming! Where is Lord Algy?"

"I guess he's not a thousand miles away!" returns Marcia, with a knowing twinkle of her dark eyes. "He'll hang round here presently! Why,—there's Mr. Lorimer worrying in at the doorway!"

"Worrying in" is scarcely the term to apply to the polite but determined manner in which George Lorimer coolly elbows a passage among the heaving bare shoulders, backs, fat arms, and long trains that seriously obstruct his passage, but after some trouble he succeeds in his efforts to reach his fair hostess, who receives him with rather a supercilious uplifting of her delicate eyebrows.

"Dear me, Mr. Lorimer, you are quite a stranger!" she observes somewhat satirically. "We thought you had made up your mind to settle in Norway!"

"Did you really, though!" and Lorimer smiles languidly. "I wonder at that,—for you knew I came back from that region in the August of last year."

"And since then I suppose you have played the hermit?" inquires her ladyship indifferently, unfurling her fan of ostrich feathers and waving it slowly to and fro.

"By no means! I went off to Scotland with a friend, Alec Macfarlane, and had some excellent shooting. Then, as I never permit my venerable mamma to pass the winter in London, I took her to Nice, from which delightful spot we returned three weeks ago."

Lady Winsleigh laughs. "I did not ask you for a categorical explanation of your movements, Mr. Lorimer," she says lightly—"I'm sure I hope you enjoyed yourself?"

He bows gravely. "Thanks! Yes,—strange to say, I *did* manage to extract a little pleasure here and there out of the universal dryness of things."

"Have you seen your friend, Sir Philip, since he came to town?" asks Mrs. Rush-Marvelle in her stately way.

"Several times. I have dined with him and

Lady Errington frequently. I understand they are to be here to-night?"

Lady Winsleigh fans herself a little more rapidly, and her full crimson lips tighten into a thin, malicious line.

"Well, I asked them, of course,—as a matter of form," she says carelessly,—"but I shall, on the whole, be rather relieved if they don't come."

A curious amused look comes over Lorimer's face.

"Indeed! May I ask why?"

"I should think the reason ought to be perfectly apparent to you"—and her ladyship's eyes flash angrily. "Sir Philip is all very well—he is by birth a gentleman,—but the person he has married is not a lady, and it is an exceedingly unpleasant duty for me to have to receive her."

A faint tinge of colour flushes Lorimer's brow. "I think," he says slowly, "I think you will find yourself mistaken, Lady Winsleigh. I believe——" Here he pauses, and Mrs. Rush-Marvelle fixes him with a stony stare.

"Are we to understand that she is educated?" she inquires freezingly. "Positively well-educated?"

Lorimer laughs. "Not according to the standard of modern fashionable requirements!" he replies.

Mrs. Marvelle sniffs the air portentously,—Lady Clara curls her lip. At that moment every-

body makes respectful way for one of the most important guests of the evening — a broad-shouldered man of careless attire, rough hair, fine features, and keen, mischievous eyes—a man of whom many stand in wholesome awe,—Beaufort Lovelace, or as he is commonly called, "Beau" Lovelace, a brilliant novelist, critic, and pitiless satirist. For him society is a game,—a gay humming-top which he spins on the palm of his hand for his own private amusement. Once a scribbler in an attic, subsisting bravely on bread and cheese and hope, he now lords it more than half the year in a palace of fairy-like beauty on the Lago di Como,—and he is precisely the same person who was formerly disdained and flouted by fair ladies because his clothes were poor and shabby, yet for whom they now practise all the arts known to their sex, in fruitless endeavours to charm and conciliate him. For he laughs at them and their pretty ways,—and his laughter is merciless. His arrowy glance discovers the "poudre de riz" on their blooming cheeks,—the carmine on their lips, and the "kohl" on their eyelashes. He knows purchased hair from the natural growth—and he has a cruel eye for discerning the artificial contour of a "made-up" figure. And like a merry satyr dancing in a legendary forest, he capers and gambols in the vast fields of Humbug—all forms of it are attacked and ridiculed by his powerful and pungent pen,—

he is a sort of English Heine gathering in rich and daily harvests from the never-perishing, incessantly-growing crop of fools. And as he,—in all the wickedness of daring and superior intellect, —approaches, Lady Winsleigh draws herself up with the conscious air of a beauty who knows she is nearly perfect,—Mrs. Rush-Marvelle makes a faint endeavour to settle the lace more modestly over her rebellious bosom,—Marcia smiles coquettishly, and Mrs. Van Clupp brings her diamond pendant (value, a thousand guineas) more prominently forward,—for as she thinks, poor ignorant soul! "wealth always impresses these literary men more than anything!" In one swift glance Beau Lovelace observes all these different movements,—and the inner fountain of his mirth begins to bubble. "What fun those Van Clupps are!" he thinks. "The old woman's got a diamond plaster on her neck! Horrible taste! She's anxious to show how much she's worth, I suppose! Mrs. Marvelle wants a shawl, and Lady Clara a bodice. By Jove! What sights the women do make of themselves!"

But his face betrays none of these reflections,—its expression is one of polite gravity, though a sudden sweetness smoothes it as he shakes hands with Lord Winsleigh and Lorimer,—a sweetness that shows how remarkably handsome Beau can look if he chooses. He rests one hand on Lorimer's shoulder.

"Why, George, old boy, I thought you were playing the dutiful son at Nice? Don't tell me you've deserted the dear old lady! Where is she? You know I've got to finish that argument with her about her beloved Byron."

Lorimer laughs. "Go and finish it when you like, Beau," he answers. "My mother's all right. She's at home. You know she's always charmed to see you. She's delighted with that new book of yours."

"Is she? She finds pleasure in trifles, then——"

"Oh no, Mr. Lovelace!" interrupts Lady Clara, with a winning glance. "You must not run yourself down! The book is exquisite! I got it at once from the library, and read every line of it!"

"I am exceedingly flattered!" says Lovelace, with a grave bow, though there is a little twinkling mockery in his glance. "When a lady so bewitching condescends to read what I have written, how can I express my emotion!"

"The press is unanimous in its praise of you," remarks Lord Winsleigh cordially. "You are quite the lion of the day!"

"Oh quite!" agrees Beau laughing. "And do I not roar 'as sweet as any nightingale'? But I say, where's the new beauty?"

"I really do not know to whom you allude, Mr. Lovelace," replies Lady Winsleigh coldly.

Lorimer smiles and is silent. Beau looks from one to the other amusedly.

"Perhaps I've made a mistake," he says, "but the Duke of Roxwell is responsible. He told me that if I came here to-night I should see one of the loveliest women living,—Lady Bruce-Errington. He saw her in the park. I think *this* gentleman"—indicating Sir Francis Lennox who bites his moustache vexedly—"said quite openly at the Club last night that she *was* the new beauty,—and that she would be here this evening."

Lady Winsleigh darts a side glance at her "Lennie" that is far from pleasant.

"Really it's perfectly absurd!" she says, with a scornful toss of her head. "We shall have housemaids and bar-girls accepted as 'quite the rage' next. I do not know Sir Philip's wife in the least,—I hear she was a common farmer's daughter. I certainly invited her to-night out of charity and kindness in order that she might get a little accustomed to society—for, of course, poor creature! entirely ignorant and uneducated as she is, everything will seem strange to her. But she has not come——"

"Sir Philip and Lady Bruce-Errington!" announces Briggs at this juncture.

There is a sudden hush—a movement of excitement,—and the groups near the door fall apart staring, and struck momentarily dumb with surprise, as a tall radiant figure in dazzling white,

with diamonds flashing on a glittering coil of gold hair, and wondrous sea-blue earnest eyes, passes through their midst with that royal free step and composed grace of bearing that might distinguish an Empress of many nations.

"Good heavens! What a magnificent woman!" mutters Beau Lovelace—"Venus realized!"

Lady Winsleigh turns very pale,—she trembles and can scarcely regain her usual composure as Sir Philip, with a proud tenderness lighting up the depths of his hazel eyes, leads this vision of youth and perfect loveliness up to her, saying simply—

"Lady Winsleigh, allow me to introduce to you —my wife! Thelma, this is Lady Winsleigh."

There is a strange sensation in Lady Winsleigh's throat as though a very tight string were suddenly drawn round it to almost strangling point—and it is certain that she feels as though she must scream, hit somebody with her fan, and rush from the room in an undignified rage. But she chokes back these purely feminine emotions—she smiles and extends her jewelled hand.

"So good of you to come to-night!" she says sweetly. "I have been longing to see you, Lady Errington! I dare say you know your husband is quite an old acquaintance of mine!"

And a languorous glance, like fire seen through smoke, leaps from beneath her silky eyelashes at Sir Philip—but he sees it not—he is chatting and

laughing gaily with Lorimer and Beau Lovelace.

"Indeed, yes!" answers Thelma, in that soft low voice of hers, which has such a thrilling richness within it—"And it is for that reason I am very glad to meet you. It is always pleasant for me to know my husband's friends."

Here she raises those marvellous, innocent eyes of hers and smiles;—why does Lady Winsleigh shrink from that frank and child-like openness of regard? Why does she, for one brief moment, hate herself?—why does she so suddenly feel herself to be vile and beneath contempt? God only knows!—but the first genuine blush that has tinged her ladyship's cheek for many a long day, suddenly spreads a hot and embarrassing tide of crimson over the polished pallor of her satiny skin, and she says hurriedly—

"I must find you some people to talk to. This is my dear friend Mrs. Rush-Marvelle—I am sure you will like each other! Let me introduce Mrs. Van Clupp to you—Mrs. Van Clupp, and Miss Van Clupp!"

These ladies bow stiffly while Thelma responds to their prim salutations with easy grace.

"Sir Francis Lennox"—continues Lady Winsleigh, and there is something like a sneer in her smile, as that gentleman makes a deep and courtly reverence, with an unmistakable look of admiration in his sleepy tiger-brown eyes,—then she turns to

Lord Winsleigh and adds in a casual way, "My husband!" Lord Winsleigh advances rather eagerly—there is a charm in the exquisite nobility of Thelma's face that touches his heart and appeals to the chivalrous and poetical part of his nature.

"Sir Philip and I have known each other for some years," he says, pressing her little fair hand cordially. "It is a great pleasure for me to see you to-night, Lady Errington,—I realize how very much my friend deserves to be congratulated on his marriage!"

Thelma smiles. This little speech pleases her, but she does not accept the compliment implied to herself.

"You are very kind, Lord Winsleigh"—she answers—"I am glad indeed that you like Philip—I do think with you that he deserves every one's good wishes. It is my great desire to make him always happy."

A brief shadow crosses Lord Winsleigh's thoughtful brow, and he studies her sweet eyes attentively. Is she sincere? Does she mean what she says? Or is she, like others of her sex, merely playing a graceful part? A slight sigh escapes him,—absolute truth, innocent love, and stainless purity are written in such fair clear lines on that perfect countenance that the mere idea of questioning her sincerity seems a sacrilege.

"Your desire is gratified, I am sure," he returns, and his voice is somewhat sad. "I never

saw him looking so well. He seems in excellent spirits."

"Oh, for that!" and she laughs. "He is a very light-hearted boy! But once he would tell me very dreadful things about the world—how it was not at all worth living in—but I do think he must have been lonely. For he is very pleased with everything now, and finds no fault at all!"

"I can quite understand that!" and Lord Winsleigh smiles, though that shadow of pain still rests on his brow.

Mrs. Rush-Marvelle and the Van Clupps are listening to the conversation with straining ears. What strange person is this? She does not talk bad grammar, though her manner of expressing herself is somewhat quaint and foreign. But she is babyish—perfectly babyish! The idea of any well-bred woman condescending to sing the praises of her own husband in public! Absurd! "Deserves every one's good wishes!"—pooh! her "great desire is to make him always happy!"—what utter rubbish!—and he is a "light-hearted boy!" Good gracious!—what next? Marcia Van Clupp is strongly inclined to giggle, and Mrs. Van Clupp is indignantly conscious that the Errington diamonds far surpass her own, both for size and lustre.

At that moment Sir Philip approaches his wife, with George Lorimer and Beau Lovelace.

Thelma's smile at Lorimer is the greeting of an old friend—a sun-bright glance that makes his heart beat a little quicker than usual. He watches her as she turns to be introduced to Lovelace,—while Miss Van Clupp, thinking of the relentless gift of satire with which that brilliant writer is endowed, looks out for "some fun"—for, as she confides in a low tone to Mrs. Marvelle—"she'll never know how to talk to that man!"

"Thelma," says Sir Philip, "this is the celebrated author, Beaufort Lovelace,—you have often heard me speak of him."

She extends both her hands, and her eyes deepen and flash.

"Ah! you are one of those great men whom we all love and admire!" she says, with direct frankness,—and the cynical Beau, who has never yet received so sincere a compliment, feels himself colouring like a school-girl. "I am so very proud to meet you! I have read your wonderful book, 'Azaziel,' and it made me glad and sorry together. For why do you draw a noble example and yet say at the same time that it is impossible to follow it? Because in one breath you inspire us to be good, and yet you tell us we shall never become so! That is not right,—is it?"

Beau meets her questioning glance with a grave smile.

"It is most likely entirely wrong from *your* point of view, Lady Errington," he said. "Some

day we will talk over the matter. You shall show me the error of my ways. Perhaps you will put life, and the troublesome business of living, in quite a new light for me! You see, we novelists have an unfortunate trick of looking at the worst or most ludicrous side of everything —we can't help it! So many apparently lofty and pathetic tragedies turn out, on close examination, to be the meanest and most miserable of farces,—it's no good making them out to be grand Greek poems when they are only base doggerel rhymes. Besides, it's the fashion nowadays to be *chiffonniers* in literature—to pick up the rags of life and sort them in all their uncomeliness before the morbid eyes of the public. What's the use of spending thought and care on the manufacture of a jewelled diadem, and offering it to the people on a velvet cushion, when they prefer an *olla-podrida* of cast-off clothing, dried bones, and candle-ends? In brief, what would it avail to write as grandly as Shakespeare or Scott, when society clamours for Zola and others of his school?"

There was a little group round them by this time,—men generally collected wherever Beau Lovelace aired his opinions,—and a double attraction drew them together now in the person of the lovely woman to whom he was holding forth.

Marcia van Clupp stared mightily—surely the Norwegian peasant would not understand

Beau's similes,—for they were certainly incomprehensible to Marcia. As for his last remark—why! she had read all Zola's novels in the secrecy of her own room, and had gloated over them;—no words could describe her intense admiration of books that were so indelicately realistic! "He is jealous of other writers, I suppose," she thought; "these literary people hate each other like poison."

Meanwhile Thelma's blue eyes looked puzzled. "I do not know that name," she said. "Zola!—what is he? He cannot be great. Shakespeare I know,—he is the glory of all the world, of course—I think him as noble as Homer. Then for Walter Scott—I love all his beautiful stories—I have read them many, many times, nearly as often as I have read Homer and the Norse Sagas. And the world must surely love such writings—or how should they last so long?" She laughed and shook her bright head archly. "*Chiffonnier! Point du tout! Monsieur, les divines penseés que vous avez donné au monde ne sont pas des chiffons.*"

Beau smiled again, and offered her his arm. "Let me find you a chair!" he said. "It will be rather a difficult matter,—still I can but try. You will be fatigued if you stand too long." And he moved through the swaying crowd, with her little gloved hand resting lightly on his coat-sleeve,—while Marcia Van Clupp and her mother exchanged looks of wonder and dismay. The "fisherwoman" could speak French,—moreover,

she could speak it with a wonderfully soft and perfect accent,—the "person" had studied Homer and Shakespeare, and was conversant with the best literature,—and, bitterest sting of all, the "peasant" could give every woman in the room a lesson in deportment, grace, and perfect taste in dress. Every costume looked tawdry beside her richly flowing velvet draperies—every low bodice became indecent compared with the modesty of that small square opening at Thelma's white throat—an opening just sufficient to display her collar of diamonds,—and every figure seemed either dumpy and awkward, too big or too fat, or too lean and too lanky—when brought into contrast with her statuesque outlines.

The die was cast,—the authority of Beau Lovelace was nearly supreme in fashionable and artistic circles, and from the moment he was seen devoting his attention to the "new beauty," excited whispers began to flit from mouth to mouth,—"She will be the rage this season!"—"We must ask her to come to us!"—"*Do* ask Lady Winsleigh to introduce us!"—"She *must* come to *our* house!" and so on. And Lady Winsleigh was neither blind nor deaf—she saw and heard plainly enough that her reign was over, and in her secret soul she was furious. The "common farmer's daughter" was neither vulgar nor uneducated—and she was surpassingly lovely—even Lady Winsleigh could not deny so plain and absolute a fact. But her

ladyship was a woman of the world, and she perceived at once that Thelma was not. Philip had married a creature with the bodily loveliness of a goddess and the innocent soul of a child—and it was just that child-like, pure soul looking serenely out of Thelma's eyes that had brought the long-forgotten blush of shame to Clara Winsleigh's cheek. But that feeling of self-contempt soon passed—she was no better and no worse than other women of her set, she thought—after all, what had she to be ashamed of? Nothing, except—except—perhaps, her "little affair" with "Lennie." A new emotion now stirred her blood—one of malice and hatred, mingled with a sense of outraged love and ungratified passion—for she still admired Philip to a foolish excess. Her dark eyes flashed scornfully as she noted the attitude of Sir Francis Lennox,—he was leaning against the marble mantel-piece, stroking his moustache with one hand, absorbed in watching Thelma, who, seated in an easy chair which Beau Lovelace had found for her, was talking and laughing gaily with those immediately around her, a group which increased in size every moment, and in which the men were most predominant.

"Fool!" muttered Lady Winsleigh to herself, apostrophizing "Lennie" in this uncomplimentary manner. "Fool! I wonder if he thinks I care! He may play hired lacquey to all the women in

London if he likes! He looks a prig compared to Philip!"

And her gaze wandered,—Philip was standing by his wife, engaged in an animated conversation with Lord Winsleigh. They were all near the grand piano—and Lady Clara, smoothing her vexed brow, swept her ruby velvets gracefully up to that quarter of the room. Before she could speak, the celebrated Herr Machtenklinken confronted her with some sternness.

"Your ladyshib vill do me ze kindness to remember," he said, loftily, "zat I am here to blay! Zere has been no obbortunity—ze biano could not make itself to be heard in zis fery moch noise. It is bossible your ladyshib shall require not ze music zis efening? In zat case I shall take my fery goot leave."

Lady Winsleigh raised her eyes with much superciliousness.

"As you please," she said coolly. "If *you* are so indifferent to your advantages—then all I can say is, so am I! You are, perhaps, known on the Continent, Herr Machtenklinken,—but not here—and I think you ought to be more grateful for my influence."

So saying, she passed on, leaving the luckless pianist in a state of the greatest indignation.

"*Gott in Himmel!*" he gasped, in a sort of infuriated *sotto voce*, "Ze Emberor himself would not have speak to me so! I come here as a

favour—her ladyshib do not offer me one *pfenning*, —ach! ze music is not for such beoble! I shall brefer to blay to bigs! Zere is no art in zis country!——"

And he began to make his way out of the room, when he was overtaken by Beau Lovelace, who had followed him in haste.

"Where are you off to, Hermann?" he asked good-naturedly. "We want you to play. There is a lady here who heard you in Paris quite recently—she admires you immensely. Won't you come and be introduced to her?"

Herr Machtenklinken paused, and a smile softened his hitherto angry countenance.

"You are fery goot, Mr. Lofelace," he remarked—'and I would do moch for *you*—but her ladyshib understands me not—she has offend me—it is better I should take my leave."

"Oh, bother her ladyship!" said Beau lightly. "Come along,—and give us something in your best style."

So saying, he led the half-reluctant artist back to the piano, where he was introduced to Thelma, who gave him so sweet a smile that he was fairly dazzled.

"It is you who play Schumann so beautifully," she said. "My husband and I heard you at one of Lamoureux's concerts in Paris. I fear," and she looked wistfully at him, "that you would think it very rude and selfish of me if I asked

you to play just one little piece? Because, of course, you are here to enjoy yourself, and talk to your friends, and it seems unkind to take you away from them!"

A strange moisture dimmed the poor German's eyes. This was the first time in England that the "celebrate" had been treated as a friend and a gentleman. Up to this moment, at all the "at homes" and "assemblies," he had not been considered as a guest at all,—he was an "artist," "a good pianist,"—"a man who had played before the Emperor of Germany"—and he was expected to perform for nothing, and be grateful for the "influence" exercised on his behalf—influence which as yet had not put one single extra guinea in his pocket. Now, here was a great lady almost apologizing for asking him to play, lest it should take him away from his "friends"! His heart swelled with emotion and gratitude—the poor fellow had no "friends" in London, except Beau Lovelace, who was kind to him, but who had no power in the musical world,—and as Thelma's gentle voice addressed him, he could have knelt and kissed her little shoe for her sweet courtesy and kindness.

"Miladi," he said, with a profound reverence, "I will blay for you with bleasure,—it will be a joy for ze music to make itself beautiful for you!"

And with this fantastic attempt at a compli-

ment, he seated himself at the instrument and struck a crashing chord to command silence.

The hum of conversation grew louder than ever—and to Thelma's surprise Lady Winsleigh seated herself by her and began to converse. Herr Machtenklinken struck another chord,—in vain! The deafening clamour of tongues continued, and Lady Winsleigh asked Thelma with much seeming interest if the scenery was very romantic in Norway?

The girl coloured deeply, and after a little hesitation, said—

"Excuse me,—I would rather not speak till the music is over. It is impossible for a great musician to think his thoughts out properly unless there is silence. Would it not be better to ask every one to leave off talking while this gentleman plays?"

Clara Winsleigh looked amused. "My dear, you don't know them," she said carelessly. "They would think me mad to propose such a thing! There are always a few who listen."

Once more the pianist poised his hands over the keys of the instrument,—Thelma looked a little troubled and grieved. Beau Lovelace saw it, and acting on a sudden impulse, turned towards the chattering crowds, and, holding up his hand, called, "Silence, please!"

There was an astonished hush. Beau laughed. "We want to hear some music," he said, with the utmost coolness. "Conversation can be continued

afterwards." He then nodded cheerfully towards Herr Machtenklinken, who, inspired by this open encouragement, started off like a race-horse into one of the exquisite rambling preludes of Chopin. Gradually, as he played, his plain face took upon itself a noble, thoughtful, rapt expression,—his wild eyes softened,—his furrowed, frowning brow smoothed,—and, meeting the grave, rare blue eyes of Thelma, he smiled. His touch grew more and more delicate and tender—from the prelude he wandered into a nocturne of plaintive and exceeding melancholy, which he played with thrilling and exquisite pathos—anon, he glided into one of those dreamily joyous yet sorrowful mazurkas, that remind one of bright flowers growing in wild luxuriance over lonely and forsaken graves. The "celebrate" had reason to boast of himself—he was a perfect master of the instrument,—and as his fingers closed on the final chord, a hearty burst of applause rewarded his efforts, led by Lovelace and Lorimer. He responded by the usual bow,—but his real gratitude was all for Thelma. For her he had played his best—and he had seen tears in her lovely eyes. He felt as proud of her appreciation as of the ring he had received from the Tsar,—and bent low over the fair hand she extended to him.

"You must be very happy," she said, "to feel all those lovely sounds in your heart! I hope I shall see and hear you again some day,—I thank

you so very much for the pleasure you have given me!"

Lady Winsleigh said nothing—and she listened to Thelma's words with a sort of contempt.

"Is the girl half-witted?" she thought. "She must be, or she would not be so absurdly enthusiastic! The man plays well,—but it is his profession to play well—it's no good praising these sort of people,—they are never grateful, and they always impose upon you." Aloud she asked Sir Philip—

"Does Lady Errington play?"

"A little," he answered. "She sings."

At once there was a chorus of inanely polite voices round the piano, "Oh, *do* sing, Lady Errington! Please, give us one song!" and Sir Francis Lennox, sauntering up, fixed his languorous gaze on Thelma's face, murmuring, "You will not be so cruel as to refuse us such delight?"

"But, of course not!" answered the girl, greatly surprised at all these unnecessary entreaties. "I am always pleased to sing." And she drew off her long loose gloves and seated herself at the piano without the least affectation of reluctance. Then, glancing at her husband with a bright smile, she asked, "What song do you think will be best, Philip?"

"One of those old Norse mountain-songs," he answered.

She played a soft minor prelude—there was

not a sound in the room now—everybody pressed towards the piano, staring with a curious fascination at her beautiful face and diamond-crowned hair. One moment—and her voice, in all its passionate, glorious fulness, rang out with a fresh vibrating tone that thrilled to the very heart—and the foolish crowd that gaped and listened was speechless, motionless, astonished, and bewildered.

A Norse mountain-song was it? How strange, and grand, and wild! George Lorimer stood apart—his eyes ached with restrained tears. He knew the melody well—and up before him rose the drear solemnity of the Altenguard hills, the glittering expanse of the Fjord, the dear old farmhouse behind its cluster of pines. Again he saw Thelma as he had seen her first—clad in her plain white gown, spinning in the dark embrasure of the rose-wreathed window—again the words of the self-destroyed Sigurd came back to his recollection, "Good things may come for others—but for you the heavens are empty!" He looked at her now,—Philip's wife—in all the splendour of her rich attire;—she was lovelier than ever, and her sweet nature was as yet unspoilt by all the wealth and luxury around her.

"Good God! what an *inferno* she has come into!" he thought vaguely. "How will she stand these people when she gets to know them? The Van Clupps, the Rush-Marvelles, and others like them,—and as for Clara Winsleigh——" He

turned to study her ladyship attentively. She was sitting quite close to the piano—her eyes were cast down, but the rubies on her bosom heaved quickly and restlessly, and she furled and unfurled her fan impatiently. "I shouldn't wonder," he went on meditating gravely, "if she doesn't try and make some mischief somehow. She looks it."

At that moment Thelma ceased singing, and the room rang with applause. Herr Machtenklinken was overcome with admiration.

"It is a voice of heaven!" he said in a rapture.

The fair singer was surrounded with people.

"I hope," said Mrs. Van Clupp, with her usual ill-bred eagerness to ingratiate herself with the titled and wealthy, "I hope you will come and see me, Lady Errington? I am at home every Friday evening to my friends."

"Oh yes," said Thelma simply. "But I am not your friend yet! When we do know each other better I will come. We shall meet each other many times first,—and then you will see if you like me to be your friend. Is it not so?"

A scarcely concealed smile reflected itself on the faces of all who heard this naïve, but indefinite acceptance of Mrs. Van Clupp's invitation, while Mrs. Van Clupp herself was somewhat mortified, and knew not what to answer. This Norwegian girl was evidently quite ignorant of the usages of polite society, or she would at once have recognised the fact that an "at home" had nothing

whatsoever to do with the obligations of friendship—besides, as far as friendship was concerned, had not Mrs. Van Clupp tabooed several of her own blood-relations and former intimate acquaintances? . . . for the very sensible reason that while she had grown richer, they had grown poorer. But now Mrs. Rush-Marvelle sailed up in all her glory, with her good-natured smile and matronly air. She was a privileged person, and she put her arm round Thelma's waist.

"You must come to me, my dear," she said with real kindness — her motherly heart had warmed to the girl's beauty and innocence,—"I knew Philip when he was quite a boy. He will tell you what a dreadfully old woman I am! You must try to like me for his sake."

Thelma smiled radiantly. "I always wish to like Philip's friends," she said frankly. "I do hope I shall please you!"

A pang of remorse smote Mrs. Rush-Marvelle's heart as she remembered how loth she had been to meet Philip's "peasant" wife,—she hesitated, —then, yielding to her warm impulse, drew the girl closer and kissed her fair rose-tinted cheek.

"You please everybody, my child," she said honestly. "Philip is a lucky man! Now I'll say good night, for it is getting late,—I'll write to you to-morrow and fix a day for you to come and lunch with me."

"But you must also come and see Philip," returned Thelma, pressing her hand.

"So I will—so I will!" and Mrs. Rush-Marvelle nodded beamingly, and made her way up to Lady Winsleigh, saying, "By-bye, Clara! Thanks for a most charming evening!"

Clara pouted. "Going already, Mimsey?" she queried,—then, in a lower tone, she said, "Well! what do you think of her?"

"A beautiful child—no more!" answered Mrs. Marvelle,—then, studying with some gravity the brilliant brunette face before her, she added in a whisper, "Leave her alone, Clara,—don't make her miserable! You know what I mean! It wouldn't take much to break her heart."

Clara laughed harshly and played with her fan.

"Dear me, Mimsey! . . . you are perfectly outrageous! Do you think I'm an ogress ready to eat her up? On the contrary, I mean to be a friend to her."

Mrs. Marvelle still looked grave.

"I'm glad to hear it," she said; "only some friends are worse than declared enemies."

Lady Winsleigh shrugged her shoulders.

"Go along, Mimsey,—go home to bed!" she exclaimed impatiently. "You are *intense!* I hate sentimental philosophy and copy-book platitudes!" She laughed again and folded her hands with an air of mock penitence, "There! I didn't mean to be rude! Good night, dear old darling!"

"Good night, Clara!" and Mrs. Marvelle, summoning her timid husband from some far corner, where he had remained in hiding, took her departure with much stateliness.

A great many people were going down to supper by this time, but Sir Philip was tired of the heat and glare and noise, and whispered as much to Thelma, who at once advanced to bid her hostess farewell.

"Won't you have some supper?" inquired her ladyship. "Don't go yet!"

But Thelma was determined not to detain her husband a moment longer than he wished—so Lady Winsleigh, seeing remonstrances were of no avail, bade them both an effusive good night.

"We must see a great deal of each other!" she said, pressing Thelma's hands warmly in her own; "I hope we shall be quite dear friends!"

"Thank you!" said Thelma, "I do hope so too, if you wish it so much. Good night, Lord Winsleigh!"

"Let me escort you to your carriage," said her noble host, at once offering her his arm.

"And allow me to follow," added Beau Lovelace, slipping his arm through Errington's, to whom he whispered, "How dare you, sir! How dare you be such a provokingly happy man in this miserable old world?" Errington laughed—and the little group had just reached the door of

the drawing-room when Thelma suddenly turned with a look of inquiry in her eyes.

"Where is Mr. Lorimer?" she said. "I have forgotten to say good night to him, Philip."

"Here I am, Lady Errington," and Lorimer sauntered forward with rather a forced smile,—a smile which altogether vanished, leaving his face strangely pale, as she stretched out her hand to him, and said laughingly—

"You bad Mr. Lorimer! Where were you? You know it would make me quite unhappy not to wish you good night. Ah, you are a very naughty brother!"

"Come home with us, George," said Sir Philip eagerly. "Do, there's a good fellow!"

"I can't, Phil!" answered Lorimer, almost pathetically. "I can't to-night—indeed, I can't! Don't ask me!" And he wrung his friend's hand hard,—and then bravely met Thelma's bright glance.

"Forgive me!" he said to her. "I know I ought to have presented myself before—I'm a dreadfully lazy fellow, you know! Good night!"

Thelma regarded him stedfastly.

"You look,—what is it you call yourself sometimes—*seedy?*" she observed. "Not well at all. Mind you come to us to-morrow!"

He promised—and then accompanied them down to their carriage—he and Beau Lovelace assisting to cover Thelma with her fur cloak, and

being the last to shake hands with Sir Philip as he sprang in beside his wife, and called to the coachman "Home!" The magic word seemed to affect the horses, for they started at a brisk trot, and within a couple of minutes the carriage was out of sight. It was a warm star-lit evening,—and as Lorimer and Lovelace re-entered Winsleigh House, Beau stole a side-glance at his silent companion.

"A plucky fellow!" he mused; "I should say he'd die game. Tortures won't wring his secret out of him." Aloud he said, "I say, haven't we had enough of this? Don't let us sup here—nothing but unsubstantial pastry and claret-cup,—the latter abominable mixture would kill me. Come on to the Club, will you?"

Lorimer gladly assented—they got their overcoats from the officious Briggs, tipped him handsomely, and departed arm in arm. The last glimpse they caught of the Winsleigh festivities was Marcia Van Clupp sitting on the stairs, polishing off with much gusto the wing and half-breast of a capon,—while the mild Lord Masherville stood on the step just above her, consoling his appetite with a spoonful of tepid yellow jelly. He had not been able to secure any capon for himself—he had been frightened away by the warning cry of "Ladies first!" shouted forth by a fat gentleman, who was on guard at the head of the supper-table, and who had already secreted

five plates of different edibles for his own consumption, in a neat corner behind the window-curtains. Meanwhile, Sir Philip Bruce-Errington, proud, happy, and triumphant, drew his wife into a close embrace as they drove home together, and said, "You were the queen of the evening, my Thelma! Have you enjoyed yourself?"

"Oh, I do not call that enjoyment!" she declared. "How is it possible to enjoy anything among so many strangers?"

"Well, what is it?" he asked laughingly.

She laughed also. "I do not know indeed what it is!" she said. "I have never been to anything like it before. It did seem to me as if all the people were on show for some reason or other. And the gentlemen did look very tired—there was nothing for them to do. Even you, my boy! You made several very big yawns! Did you know that?"

Philip laughed more than ever. "I didn't know it, my pet!" he answered; "but I'm not surprised. Big yawns are the invariable result of an 'at home.' Do you like Beau Lovelace?"

"Very much," she answered readily. "But, Philip, I should not like to have so many friends as Lady Winsleigh. I thought friends were rare?"

"So they are! She doesn't care for these people a bit. They are mere acquaintances."

"Whom does she care for then?" asked Thelma

suddenly. "Of course I mean after her husband. Naturally she loves him best."

"Naturally," and Philip paused, adding, "She has her son—Ernest—he's a fine bright boy—he was not there to-night. You must see him some day. Then I think her favourite friend is Mrs. Rush-Marvelle."

"I do like that lady too," said Thelma. "She spoke very kindly to me and kissed me."

"Did she really!" and Philip smiled. "I think she was more to be congratulated on taking the kiss than you in receiving it! But she's not a bad old soul,—only a little too fond of money. But, Thelma, whom do *you* care for most? You did tell me once, but I forget!"

She turned her lovely face and star-like eyes upon him, and, meeting his laughing look, she smiled.

"How often must I tell you!" she murmured softly. "I do think you will never tire of hearing! You know that it is you for whom I care most, and that all the world would be empty to me without you! Oh, my husband—my darling! do not make me try to tell you how much I love you! I cannot—my heart is too full!"

The rest of their drive homeward was very quiet — there are times when silence is more eloquent than speech.

CHAPTER IV.

"A small cloud,—so slight as to be a mere speck on the fair blue sky, was all the warning we received."—PLINY.

AFTER that evening great changes came into Thelma's before peaceful life. She had conquered her enemies, or so it seemed,—society threw down all its barricades and rushed to meet her with open arms. Invitations crowded upon her,—often she grew tired and bewildered in the multiplicity of them all. London life wearied her,—she pre-preferred the embowered seclusion of Errington Manor, the dear old house in green-wooded Warwickshire. But the "season" claimed her,—its frothy gaieties were deemed incomplete without her—no "at home" was considered quite "the" thing unless she was present. She became the centre of a large and ever-widening social circle, —painters, poets, novelists, wits, *savants*, and celebrities of high distinction crowded her rooms, striving to entertain her as well as themselves with that inane small talk and gossip too often

practised by the wisest among us,—and thus surrounded, she began to learn many puzzling and painful things of which in her old Norwegian life she had been happily ignorant.

For instance, she had once imagined that all the men and women of culture who followed the higher professions must perforce be a sort of "Joyous Fraternity," superior to other mortals not so gifted,—and, under this erroneous impression she was at first eager to know some of the so-called "great" people who had distinguished themselves in literature or the fine arts. She had fancied that they must of necessity be all refined, sympathetic, large-hearted, and noble-minded—alas! how grievously was she disappointed! She found, to her sorrow that the tree of modern Art bore but few wholesome roses and many cankered buds—that the "Joyous Fraternity" were not joyous at all—but on the contrary, inclined to dyspepsia and discontentment. She found that even poets, whom she had fondly deemed were the angel-guides among the children of this earth,—were most of them painfully conceited, selfish in aim and limited in thought,—moreover, that they were often so empty of all true inspiration, that they were actually able to hate and envy one another with a sort of womanish spite and temper,—that novelists, professing to be in sympathy with the heart of humanity, were no sooner brought into contact

one with another, than they plainly showed by look, voice, and manner, the contempt they entertained for each other's work,—that men of science were never so happy as when trying to upset each other's theories;—that men of religious combativeness were always on the alert to destroy each other's creeds,—and that, in short, there was a very general tendency to mean jealousies, miserable heart-burnings and utter weariness all round.

On one occasion, she, in the sweetest simplicity, invited two lady authoresses of note to meet at one of her "at homes," . . . she welcomed both the masculine-looking ladies with a radiant smile, and introduced them, saying gently,—"You will be so pleased to know each other!" But the stony stare, stiff nod, portentous sniff, and scornful smile with which these two eminent females exchanged cold greetings, were enough to daunt the most sympathetic hostess that ever lived—and when they at once retired to different corners of the room and sat apart with their backs turned to one another for the remainder of the evening, their attitude was so uncompromising that it was no wonder the gentle Thelma felt quite dismayed and wretched at the utter failure of the *rencontre*.

"They would *not* be sociable!" she afterwards complained to Lady Winsleigh. "They *tried* to be as rude to each other as they could!"

Lady Winsleigh laughed. "Of course!" she

said. "What else *did* you expect! But if you want some fun, ask a young, pretty, and brilliant authoress (there are a few such) to meet an old, ugly and dowdy one, (and there are many such) and watch the dowdy one's face! It will be a delicious study of expression I assure you!"

But Thelma would not try this delicate experiment,—in fact, she began rather to avoid literary people, with the exception of Beau Lovelace. His was a genial, sympathetic nature, and, moreover, he had a winning charm of manner which few could resist. He was not a bookworm,—he was not, strictly speaking, a literary man,—and he was entirely indifferent to public praise or blame. He was, as he himself expressed it, "a servant and worshipper of literature," and there is a wide gulf of difference between one who serves literature for its own sake and one who uses it basely as a tool to serve himself.

But in all her new and varied experiences, perhaps Thelma was most completely bewildered by the women she met. Her simple Norse beliefs in the purity and gentleness of womanhood were startled and outraged,—she could not understand London ladies at all. Some of them seemed to have no idea beyond dress and show, —others looked upon their husbands, the lawful protectors of their name and fame, with easy indifference as though they were mere bits of household furniture,—others, having nothing better

to do, "went in" for spiritualism,—the low spiritualism that manifests itself in the turning of tables and moving of side-boards—not the higher spiritualism of an improved, perfected, and saint-like way of life—and these argued wildly on the theory of matter passing through matter, to the extent of declaring themselves able to send a letter or box through the wall without making a hole in it,—and this with such obstinate gravity as made Thelma fear for their reason. Then there were the women-atheists,—creatures who had voluntarily crushed all the sweetness of the sex within them—foolish human flowers without fragrance, that persistently turned away their faces from the sunlight and denied its existence, preferring to wither, profitless, on the dry stalk of their own theory;—there were the "platform-women," unnatural products of an unnatural age,—there were the great ladies of the aristocracy who turned with scorn from a case of real necessity, and yet spent hundreds of pounds on private theatricals wherein they might have the chance of displaying themselves in extravagant costumes,—and there were the "professional" beauties, who, if suddenly deprived of elegant attire and face-cosmetics, turned out to be no beauties at all, but very ordinary, unintelligent persons.

"What is the exact meaning of the term, 'professional beauty'?" Thelma had asked Beau Lovelace on one occasion. "I suppose it is some

very poor beautiful woman who takes money for showing herself to the public, and having her portraits sold in the shops? And who is it that pays her?"

Lovelace broke into a laugh. "Upon my word, Lady Errington,—you have put the matter in a most original but indubitably correct light! Who pays the 'professional beauty,' you ask? Well, in the case of Mrs. Smith-Gresham, whom you met the other day, it is a certain Duke who pays her to the tune of several thousands a year. When he gets tired of her, or she of him, she'll find somebody else—or perhaps she'll go on the stage and swell the list of bad amateurs. She'll get on somehow, as long as she can find a fool ready to settle her dressmaker's bill."

"I do not understand!" said Thelma,—and her fair brows drew together in that pained grave look that was becoming rather frequent with her now.

And she began to ask fewer questions concerning the various strange phases of social life that puzzled her,—why, for instance, religious theorists made so little practical use of their theories,—why there were cloudy-eyed eccentrics who admired the faulty drawing of Watts, and the common-place sentence-writing of Walt Whitman,—why members of Parliament talked so much and did so little,—why new poets, however nobly inspired, were never accepted unless they

had influential friends on the press,—why painters always married their models or their cooks, and got heartily ashamed of them afterwards,—and why people all round said so many things they did not mean. And confused by the general insincerity, she clung,—poor child!—to Lady Winsleigh, who had the tact to seem what she was not, —and the cleverness to probe into Thelma's nature and find out how translucently clear and pure it was—a perfect well of sweet water into which, one drop of poison, or better still, several drops, gradually and insidiously instilled, might in time taint its flavour and darken its brightness. For if a woman have an innocent, unsuspecting soul as delicate as the curled cup of a Nile lily, the more easily will it droop and wither in the heated grasp of a careless, cruel hand. And to this flower-crushing task Lady Winsleigh set herself, —partly for malice prepense against Errington, whose coldness to herself in past days had wounded her vanity, and partly for private jealousy of Thelma's beauty and attractiveness.

Within a short time she had completely won the girl's confidence and affection,—Sir Philip, forgetting his former suspicions of her, was touched and disarmed by the attachment and admiration she openly displayed towards his young wife,—she and Thelma were constantly seen together, and Mrs. Rush-Marvelle, far-sighted as she generally was, often sighed doubtfully and rubbed her nose

in perplexity as she confessed she "couldn't quite understand Clara." But Mrs. Rush-Marvelle had her hands full of other matters,—she was aiding and abetting Marcia Van Clupp to set traps for that mild mouse Lord Masherville,—and she was too much absorbed in this difficult and delicate business to attend to anything else just then. Otherwise, it is possible she might have scented danger for Thelma's peace of mind, and being good-natured, might have warded it off before it approached too closely,—but, like policemen who are never within call when wanted, so friends are seldom at hand when their influence might be of real benefit.

The Van Clupps were people Thelma could not get on with at all—she tried to do so because Mrs. Rush-Marvelle had assured her they were "charming"—and she liked Mrs. Marvelle sufficiently well to be willing to please her. But, in truth, these rich and vulgar Yankees seemed to her mind less to be esteemed than the peasants of the Altenfjord, who in many instances possessed finer tact and breeding than old Van Clupp, the man of many dollars, whose father had been nothing but a low navvy, but of whom he spoke now with smirking pride as a real descendant of the Pilgrim Fathers. An odd thing it is, by the way, how fond some Americans are of tracing back their ancestry to these virtuous old gentlemen! The Van Clupps were of course not the best types of

their country—they were of that class who, because they have money, measure everything by the money-standard, and hold even a noble poverty in utter contempt. Poor Van Clupp! It was sometimes pitiable to see him trying to be a gentleman —"going in" for "style"—to an excess that was ludicrous,—cramming his house with expensive furniture like an upholsterer's show-room,—drinking his tea out of pure Sèvres, with a lofty ignorance of its beauty and value,—dressing his wife and daughter like shilling fashion-plates, and having his portrait taken in precisely the same attitude as that assumed by the Duke of Wrigglesbury when his Grace sat to the same photographer! It was delicious to hear him bragging of his pilgrim ancestor,—while in the same breath he would blandly sneer at certain "poor gentry" who could trace back their lineage to Cœur de Lion! But because the Erringtons were rich as well as titled persons, Van Clupp and his belongings bent the servile knee before them, flattering Thelma with that ill-judged eagerness and zealous persistency which distinguish inborn vulgarity, and which, far from pleasing her, annoyed and embarrassed her because she could not respond sincerely to such attentions.

There were many others too, not dollar-crusted Americans, whose excessive adulation and ceaseless compliment vexed the sincere, frank spirit of the girl,—a spirit fresh and pure as the wind blowing

over her own Norse mountains. One of these was Sir Francis Lennox, that fashionable young man of leisure,—and she had for him an instinctive, though quite unreasonable aversion. He was courtesy itself—he spared no pains to please her. Yet she felt as if his basilisk brown eyes were always upon her,—he seemed to be ever at hand, ready to watch over her in trifles, such as the passing of a cup of tea, the offering of her wrap, —the finding of a chair,—the holding of a fan,—he was always on the alert, like a remarkably well-trained upper servant. She could not, without rudeness, reject such unobtrusive, humble services,—and yet—they rendered her uncomfortable, though she did not quite know why. She ventured to mention her feeling concerning him to her friend, Lady Winsleigh, who heard her timid remarks with a look on her face that was not quite pleasant.

"Poor Sir Francis!" her ladyship said with a slight, mocking laugh. "He's never happy unless he plays puppy-dog! Don't mind him, Thelma! He won't bite, I assure you,—he means no harm. It's only his little way of making himself agreeable!"

George Lorimer, during this particular "London season," fled the field of action, and went to Paris to stay with Pierre Duprèz. He felt that it was dangerous to confront the fair enemy too often, for he knew in his own honest

heart that his passion for Thelma increased each time he saw her—so, he avoided her. She missed him very much from her circle of intimates, and often went to see his mother, Mrs. Lorimer, one of the sweetest old ladies in the world,—who had at once guessed her son's secret, but, like a prudent dame, kept it to herself. There were few young women as pretty and charming as old Mrs. Lorimer, with her snow-white parted hair and mild blue eyes, and voice as cheery as the note of a thrush in spring-time. After Lady Winsleigh, Thelma liked her best of all her new friends, and was fond of visiting her quiet little house in Kensington,—for it was very quiet, and seemed like a sheltered haven of rest from the great rush of frivolity and folly in which the fashionable world delighted.

And Thelma was often now in need of rest. As the season drew towards its close, she found herself strangely tired and dispirited. The life she was compelled to lead was all unsuited to her nature—it was artificial and constrained,—and she was often unhappy. Why? Why, indeed! She did her best,—but she made enemies everywhere. Again, why? Because she had a most pernicious,—most unpleasant habit of telling the truth. Like Socrates, she seemed to say—"If any man should appear to me not to possess virtue, but to pretend that he does, I shall reproach him." This she expressed silently in

face, voice, and manner,—and, like Socrates, she might have added that she went about "perceiving, indeed, and grieving and alarmed that she was making herself odious." For she discovered, by degrees, that many people looked strangely upon her—that others seemed afraid of her—and she continually heard that she was considered "eccentric." So she became more reserved—even cold,—she was content to let others argue about trifles, and air their whims and follies without offering an opinion on any side.

And by-and-by the first shadow began to sweep over the fairness of her married life. It happened at a time when she and her husband were not quite so much together,—society and its various claims had naturally separated them a little, but now a question of political ambition separated them still more. Some well-intentioned friends had persuaded Sir Philip to stand for Parliament,—and this idea no sooner entered his head, than he decided with impulsive ardour that he had been too long without a "career,"—and a "career" he must have in order to win distinction for his wife's sake. Therefore, summoning his secretary, Neville, to his aid, he plunged headlong into the seething, turgid waters of English politics, and shut himself up in his library day after day, studying blue-books, writing and answering letters, and drawing up addresses,—and with the general proneness of the masculine mind to attend to one thing only at a time, he grew so absorbed in his

work that his love for Thelma, though all unchanged and deep as ever, fell slightly into the background of his thoughts. Not that he neglected her,—he simply concerned himself more with other things. So it happened that a certain indefinable sense of loss weighed upon her,—a vague, uncomprehended solitude began to encompass her,—a solitude even more keenly felt when she was surrounded by friends than when she was quite alone,—and as the sweet English June drew to its end, she grew languid and listless, and her blue eyes often filled with sudden tears. Her little watch-dog, Britta, began to notice this, and to wonder concerning the reason of her mistress's altered looks.

"It is this dreadful London," thought Britta. "So hot and stifling—there's no fresh air for her. And all this going about to balls and parties and shows—no wonder she is tired out!"

But it was something more than mere fatigue that made Thelma's eyes look sometimes so anxious, so gravely meditative and earnest. One day she seemed so much abstracted and lost in painful musings that Britta's loving heart ached, and she watched her for some moments without venturing to say a word. At last she spoke out bravely—

"Fröken!"—she paused,—Thelma seemed not to hear her,—"Fröken!—has anything vexed or grieved you to-day?"

Thelma started nervously. "Vexed me—grieved me?" she repeated. "No, Britta—why do you ask?"

"You look very tired, dear Fröken," continued Britta gently. "You are not as bright as you were when we first came to London."

Thelma's lips quivered. "I—I am not well, Britta," she murmured, and suddenly her self-control gave way, and she broke into tears. In an instant Britta was kneeling by her, coaxing and caressing her, and calling her by every endearing name she could think of, while she wisely forbore from asking any more questions. Presently her sobs grew calmer,—she rested her fair head against Britta's shoulder and smiled faintly. At that moment a light tap was heard outside, and a voice called—

"Thelma! Are you there?"

Britta opened the door, and Sir Philip entered hurriedly and smiling—but stopped short to survey his wife in dismay.

"Why, my darling!" he exclaimed distressfully. "Have you been crying?"

Here the discreet Britta retired.

Thelma sprang to her husband and nestled in his arms.

"Philip, do not mind it!" she murmured. "I felt a little sad—it is nothing! But tell me—you *do* love me? You will never tire of me? You have always loved me, I am sure?"

He raised her face gently with one hand, and looked at her in surprise.

"Thelma—what strange questions from *you!* Love you? Is not every beat of my heart for you? Are you not my life, my joy—my everything in this world?" And he pressed her passionately in his arms and kissed her.

"You have never loved any one else so much?" she whispered, half abashed.

"Never!" he answered readily. "What makes you ask such a thing?"

She was silent. He looked down at her flushing cheeks and tear-wet lashes attentively.

"You are fanciful to-day, my pet," he said at last. "You've been tiring yourself too much. You must rest. You'd better not go to the Brilliant Theatre to-night—it's only a burlesque, and is sure to be vulgar and noisy. We'll stop at home and spend a quiet evening together,—shall we?"

She raised her eyes half wistfully and smiled. "I should like that very, very much, Philip!" she murmured; "but you know we did promise Clara to go with her to-night. And as we are so soon to leave London and return to Warwickshire, I should not like to disappoint her."

"You are very fond of Clara?" he asked suddenly.

"Very!" She paused and sighed slightly. "She is so kind and clever—much more clever

than I can ever be—and she knows many things about the world which I do not. And she admires you so much, Philip!"

"Does she indeed?" Philip laughed and coloured a little. "Very good of her, I'm sure! And so you'd really like to go to the Brilliant to-night?"

"I think so," she said hesitatingly. "Clara says it will be very amusing. And you must remember how much I enjoyed 'Faust' and 'Hamlet.'"

Errington smiled. "You'll find the Brilliant performance very different to either," he said amusedly. "You don't know what a burlesque is like!"

"Then I must be instructed," replied Thelma, smiling also,—"I need to learn many things. I am very ignorant!"

"Ignorant!" and he swept aside with a caressing touch the clustering hair from her broad, noble brow. "My darling, you possess the greatest wisdom—the wisdom of innocence. I would not change it for all the learning of the sagest philosophers!"

"You really mean that?" she asked half timidly.

"I really mean that!" he answered fondly. "Little sceptic! As if I would ever say anything to you that I did *not* mean! I shall be glad when we're out of London and back at the Manor—then

I shall have you all to myself again—for a time, at least."

She raised her eyes full of sudden joy,—all traces of her former depression had disappeared.

"And *I* shall have *you!*" she said gladly. "And we shall not disappoint Lady Winsleigh to-night, Philip—I am not tired—and I shall be pleased to go to the theatre."

"All right!" responded Philip cheerfully. "So let it be! Only I don't believe you'll like the piece,—though it certainly won't make you cry. Yet I doubt if it will make you laugh, either. However, it will be a new experience for you."

And a new experience it decidedly was,—an experience, too, which brought some strange and perplexing results to Thelma of which she never dreamed.

She went to the Brilliant, accompanied by Lady Winsleigh and her husband,—Neville, the secretary, making the fourth in their box; and during the first and second scene of the performance the stage effects were so pretty and the dancing so graceful that she nearly forgot the bewildered astonishment she had at first felt at the extreme scantiness of apparel worn by the ladies of the ballet. They represented birds, bees, butterflies, and other winged denizens of the forest-world,—and the *tout-ensemble* was so fairy-like and brilliant with swift movement, light, and

colour that the eye was too dazzled and confused to note objectionable details. But in the third scene, when a plump, athletic young woman leaped on the stage in the guise of a humming-bird, with a feather tunic so short that it was a mere waist-belt of extra width,—a flesh-coloured bodice about three inches high, and a pair of blue wings attached to her fat shoulders, Thelma started and half rose from her seat in dismay, while a hot tide of colour crimsoned her cheeks. She looked nervously at her husband.

"I do not think this is pleasant to see," she said in a low tone. "Would it not be best to go away? I—I think I would rather be at home."

Lady Winsleigh heard and smiled,—a little mocking smile.

"Don't be silly, child!" she said. "If you leave the theatre just now you'll have every one staring at you. That woman's an immense favourite—she is the success of the piece. She's got more diamonds than either you or I."

Thelma regarded her friend with a sort of grave wonder,—but said nothing in reply. If Lady Winsleigh liked the performance and wished to remain, why,—then politeness demanded that Thelma should not interfere with her pleasure by taking an abrupt leave. So she resumed her seat, but withdrew herself far behind the curtain of the box, in a corner where the stage was almost in-

visible to her eyes. Her husband bent over her and whispered—

"I'll take you home if you wish it, dear! only say the word."

She shook her head.

"Clara enjoys it!" she answered somewhat plaintively. "We must stay."

Philip was about to address Lady Winsleigh on the subject, when suddenly Neville touched him on the arm.

"Can I speak to you alone for a moment, Sir Philip?" he said in a strange, hoarse whisper. "Outside the box—away from the ladies—a matter of importance!"

He looked as if he were about to faint. He gasped rather than spoke these words; his face was white as death, and his eyes had a confused and bewildered stare.

"Certainly!" answered Philip promptly, though not without an accent of surprise,—and, excusing their absence briefly to his wife and Lady Winsleigh, they left the box together. Meanwhile the well-fed "Humming-Bird" was capering extravagantly before the footlights, pointing her toe in the delighted face of the stalls and singing in a loud, coarse voice the following refined ditty—

"Oh my ducky, oh my darling, oh my duck, duck, duck!
If you love me you must have a little pluck, pluck, pluck!
Come and put your arms around me, kiss me once, twice, thrice,
For kissing may be naughty, but, by Jingo! it is nice!

Once, twice, thrice!
Nice, nice, nice!
Bliss, bliss, bliss!
Kiss, kiss, kiss!
Kissing may be naughty, but it's nice!"

There were several verses in this graceful poem, and each one was hailed with enthusiastic applause. The "Humming-Bird" was triumphant, and when her song was concluded she executed a startling *pas-seul* full of quaint and astonishing surprises, reaching her superbest climax when she backed off the stage on one portly leg,—kicking the other in regular time to the orchestra. Lady Winsleigh laughed, and leaning towards Thelma, who still sat in her retired corner, said with a show of kindness—

"You dear little goose! You must get accustomed to this kind of thing—it takes with the men immensely. Why, even your wonderful Philip has gone down behind the scenes with Neville—you may be sure of that!"

The startled, pitiful astonishment in the girl's face might have touched a less callous heart than Lady Winsleigh's,—but her ladyship was prepared for it and only smiled.

"Gone behind the scenes! To see that dreadful woman!" exclaimed Thelma in a low pained tone. "Oh no, Clara! He would not do such a thing. Impossible!"

"Well, my dear, then where is he? He has been gone quite ten minutes. Look at the stalls—

all the men are out of them! I tell you Violet Vere draws everybody of the male sex after her! At the end of all her 'scenes' she has a regular reception—for men only—of course! Ladies not admitted!" And Clara Winsleigh laughed. "Don't look so shocked for heaven's sake, Thelma, —you don't want your husband to be a regular nincompoop! He must have his amusements as well as other people. I believe you want him to be like a baby, tied to your apron-string! You'll find that an awful mistake,—he'll get tired to death of you, sweet little Griselda though you are!"

Thelma's face grew very pale, and her hand closed more tightly on the fan she held.

"You have said that so very, very often lately, Clara!" she murmured. "You seem so sure that he will get tired—that all men get tired. I do not think you know Philip—he is not like any other person I have ever met. And why should he go behind the scenes to such a person as Violet Vere——"

At that moment the box-door opened with a sharp click, and Errington entered alone. He looked disturbed and anxious.

"Neville is not well," he said abruptly, addressing his wife. "I've sent him home. He wouldn't have been able to sit this thing out." And he glanced half angrily towards the stage—the curtain had just gone up again and displayed the wondrous Violet Vere still in her "humming-bird" character,

swinging on the branch of a tree and (after the example of all humming-birds) smoking a cigar with brazen-faced tranquillity.

"I am sorry he is ill," said Thelma gently. "That is why you were so long away?"

"Was I long?" returned Philip somewhat absently. "I didn't know it. I went to ask a question behind the scenes."

Lady Winsleigh coughed and glanced at Thelma, whose eyes dropped instantly.

"I suppose you saw Violet Vere?" asked Clara.

"Yes, I saw her," he replied briefly. He seemed irritable and vexed—moreover, decidedly impatient. Presently he said—

"Lady Winsleigh, would you mind very much if we left this place and went home? I'm rather anxious about Neville—he's had a shock. Thelma doesn't care a bit about this piece, I know, and if you are not very much absorbed——"

Lady Winsleigh rose instantly, with her usual ready grace.

"My dear Sir Philip!" she said sweetly. "As if I would not do anything to oblige you! Let us go by all means! These burlesques *are* extremely fatiguing!"

He seemed relieved by her acquiescence—and smiled that rare sweet smile of his, which had once played such havoc with her ladyship's sensitive feelings. They left the theatre, and were

soon on their way home, though Thelma was rather silent during the drive. They dropped Lady Winsleigh at her own door, and after they had bidden her a cordial good night, and were going on again towards home, Philip, turning towards his wife, and catching sight of her face by the light of a street-lamp, was struck by her extreme paleness and weary look.

"You are very tired, my darling, I fear?" he inquired, tenderly encircling her with one arm. "Lean your head on my shoulder—so!"

She obeyed, and her hand trembled a little as he took and held it in his own warm, strong clasp.

"We shall soon be home!" he added cheerily. "And I think we must have no more theatre-going this season. The heat and noise and glare are too much for you."

"Philip," said Thelma suddenly. "Did you really go behind the scenes to-night?"

"Yes, I did," he answered readily. "I was obliged to go on a matter of business—a very disagreeable and unpleasant matter too."

"And what was it?" she asked timidly, yet hopefully.

"My pet, I can't tell you! I wish I could! It's a secret I'm bound not to betray—a secret which involves the name of another person who'd be wretched if I were to mention it to you. There, —don't let us talk about it any more!"

"Very well, Philip," said Thelma resignedly, —but though she smiled, a sudden presentiment of evil depressed her. The figure of the vulgar, half-clothed, painted creature known as Violet Vere rose up mockingly before her eyes,—and the half-scornful, half-jesting words of Lady Winsleigh rang persistently in her ears.

On reaching home, Philip went straight to Neville's little study and remained with him in earnest conversation for a long time—while Thelma went to bed, and lay restless among her pillows, puzzling her brain with strange forebodings and new and perplexing ideas, till fatigue overpowered her, and she fell asleep with a few tear-drops wet on her lashes. And that night Philip wondered why his sweet wife talked so plaintively in her sleep,—though he smiled as he listened to the drift of those dove-like murmurings.

"No one knows how my boy loves me," sighed the dreaming voice. "No one in all the world! How should he tire? Love can never tire!'

Meanwhile, Lady Winsleigh, in the seclusion of her own boudoir, penned a brief note to Sir Francis Lennox as follows—

"Dear old Lennie,

"I saw you in the stalls at the theatre this evening, though you pretended not to see me. What a fickle creature you are! not that I mind in the very least. The virtuous Bruce-Errington

left his saintly wife and me to talk little platitudes together, while he, decorously accompanied by his secretary, went down to pay court to Violet Vere. How stout she is getting! Why don't you men advise her to diet herself? I know you also went behind the scenes—of course, *you* are an *ami intime*—promising boy you are, to be sure! Come and lunch with me to-morrow, if you're not too lazy.

"Yours ever,
"CLARA."

She gave this missive to her maid, Louise Rénaud, to post,—that faithful attendant took it first to her own apartment where she ungummed the envelope neatly by the aid of hot water, and read every word of it. This was not an exceptional action of hers,—all the letters received and sent by her mistress were subjected to the same process,—even those that were sealed with wax she had a means of opening in such a manner that it was impossible to detect that they had been tampered with.

She was a very clever French maid was Louise,—one of the cleverest of her class. Fond of mischief, ever suspicious, always on the alert for evil, utterly unscrupulous and malicious, she was an altogether admirable attendant for a lady of rank and fashion, her skill as a *coiffeur* and needlewoman always obtaining for her the wages

she so justly deserved. When will wealthy women reared in idleness and luxury learn the folly of keeping a trained spy attached to their persons? — a spy whose pretended calling is merely to arrange dresses and fripperies (half of which she invariably steals), but whose real delight is to take note of all her mistress's incomings and outgoings, tempers and tears—to watch her looks, her smiles and frowns,—and to start scandalous gossip concerning her in the servants' hall, from whence it gradually spreads to the society newspapers—for do you think these estimable and popular journals are never indebted for their "reliable" information to the "honest" statements of a discharged footman or valet? Briggs, for instance, had tried his hand at a paragraph or two concerning the "Upper Ten," and with the aid of a dictionary. had succeeded in expressing himself quite smartly, though in ordinary conversation his h's were often lacking or superfluous, and his grammar doubtful. Whether he persuaded any editor to accept his literary efforts is quite another matter—a question to which the answer must remain for ever enveloped in mystery,—but if he *did* appear in print (it is only an if!) he must have been immensely gratified to consider that his statements were received with gusto by at least half aristocratic London, and implicitly believed as having emanated from the "best authorities." And Louise Rénaud having posted her mistress's

letter at last, went down to visit Briggs in his private pantry, and to ask him a question.

"Tell me," she said rapidly, with her tight, prim smile. "You read the papers—you will know. What lady is that of the theatres—Violet Vere?"

Briggs laid down the paper he was perusing and surveyed her with a superior air.

"What, Vi?" he exclaimed with a lazy wink. "Vi, of the Hopperer-Buff? You've 'erd of 'er, surely, Mamzelle? No? There's not a man (as is worth calling a man) about town, as don't know *'er!* Dukes, Lords, an' Royal 'Ighnesses—she's the style for 'em! Mag-ni-ficent creetur! all legs and arms! I won't deny but wot I 'ave an admiration for 'er myself—I bought a 'arf-crown portrait of 'er quite recently." And Briggs rose slowly and searched in a mysterious drawer which he invariably kept locked.

"'Ere she is, as large as life, Mamzelle," he continued, exhibiting a "promenade" photograph of the actress in question. "There's a neck for you! There's form! Vi, my dear, I saloot you!" and he pressed a sounding kiss on the picture—"You're one in a million! Smokes and drinks like a trooper, Mamzelle!" he added admiringly, as Louise Rénaud studied the portrait attentively. "But with all 'er advantages, you would not call 'er a lady. No—that term would be out of the question. She is wot we men would

call an enchantin' female!" And Briggs kissed the tips of his fingers and waved them in the air as he had seen certain foreign gentlemen do when enthusiastic.

"I comprehend," said the French maid, nodding emphatically. "Then, if she is so, what makes that proud Seigneur Bruce-Errington visit her?" Here she shook her finger at Briggs. "And leave his beautiful lady wife, to go and see her?" Another shake. "And that *miserable* Sieur Lennox to go also? Tell me that!" She folded her arms, like Napoleon at St. Helena, and smiled again that smile which was nothing but a sneer. Briggs rubbed his nose contemplatively.

"Little Francis can go ennywheres," he said at last. "He's laid out a good deal of tin on Vi and others of 'er purfession. You cannot make enny-think of that young feller but a cad. I would not accept 'im for my pussonal attendant. No! But Sir Philip Bruce-Errington——" He paused, then continued, "Air you sure of your facts, Mamzelle?"

Mamzelle was so sure, that the bow on her cap threatened to come off with the determined wagging of her head.

"Well," resumed Briggs, "Sir Philip may, like hothers, consider it 'the thing' you know, to 'ang on as it were to Vi. But I '*ad* thought 'im superior to it. Ah! poor 'uman natur, as

'Uxley says!" and Briggs sighed. "Lady Errington is a sweet creetur, Mamzelle—a *very* sweet creetur! *Has* a rule I find the merest nod of my 'ed a sufficient saloot to a woman of the aristocracy—but for *'er*, Mamzelle, I never fail to show 'er up with a court bow!" And involuntarily Briggs bowed then and there in his most elegant manner. Mamzelle tightened her thin lips a little and waved her hand expressively.

"She is an angel of beauty!" she said, "and Miladi Winsleigh is jealous—ah, *Dieu!* jealous to death of her! She is innocent too—like a baby—and she worships her husband. That is an error! To worship a man is a great mistake—she will find it so. Men are not to be too much loved—no, no!"

Briggs smiled in superb self-consciousness. "Well, well! I will not deny Mamzelle, that it spoils us," he said complacently. "It certainly spoils us! 'When lovely woman stoops to folly;' —the hold, hold story!"

"You will r-r-r-emember," said Mamzelle, suddenly stepping up very close to him and speaking with a strong accent, "what I have said to-night! Monsieur Briggs, you will r-remember! There will be mees-cheef! Yes—there will be mees-cheef to Sieur Bruce-Errington, and when there is,—I—I, Louise Rénaud—I know who ees at the bottom of eet!"

So saying, with a whirl of her black silk

dress and a flash of her white muslin apron, she disappeared. Briggs left alone, sauntered to a looking-glass hanging on the wall and studied with some solicitude a pimple that had recently appeared on his clean-shaven face.

"Mischief!" he soliloquized. "I des-say! Whenever a lot of women gets together, there's sure to be mischief. Dear creeturs! They love it like the best Clicquot! Sprightly young pusson is Mamzelle. Knows who's at the bottom of 'eet,' does she? Well—she's not the only one as knows the same thing! As long as doors 'as cracks and key'oles, it ain't in the least difficult to find out wot goes on inside boo-dwars and drorin'-rooms. And 'ighly interestin' things one 'ears now and then—'ighly interestin'!"

And Briggs leered suavely at his own reflection, and then resumed the perusal of his paper. He was absorbed in the piquant, highly flavoured details of a particularly disgraceful divorce case, and he was by no means likely to disturb himself from his refined enjoyment for any less important reason than the summons of Lord Winsleigh's bell, which rang so seldom that, when it did, he made it a point of honour to answer it immediately, for, as he said—

"His lordship knows wot is due to me, and I knows wot is due to 'im—therefore it 'appens we are able to ekally respect each other!"

CHAPTER V.

"If thou wert honourable,
Thou wouldst have told this tale for virtue, not
For such an end thou seek'st; as base, as strange.
Thou wrong'st a gentleman who is as far
From thy report, as thou from honour."

Cymbeline.

SUMMER in Shakespeare Land! Summer in the heart of England—summer in wooded Warwickshire,—a summer brilliant, warm, radiant with flowers, melodious with the songs of the heaven-aspiring larks, and the sweet, low trill of the forest-hidden nightingales. Wonderful and divine it is to hear the wild chorus of nightingales that sing beside Como in the hot languorous nights of an Italian July—wonderful to hear them maddening themselves with love and music, and almost splitting their slender throats with the bursting bubbles of burning song,—but there is something, perhaps, more dreamily enchanting still,—to hear them warbling less passionately but more plaintively, beneath the drooping leafage of those grand old trees, some of which may have stretched their

branches in shadowy benediction over the sacred head of the grandest poet in the world. Why travel to Athens,—why wander among the Ionian Isles for love of the classic ground? Surely, though the clear-brained old Greeks were the founders of all noble literature, they have reached their fulminating point in the English Shakespeare,—and the Warwickshire lanes, decked simply with hawthorn and sweet-briar roses, through which Mary Arden walked leading her boy-angel by the hand, are sacred as any portion of that earth once trodden by the feet of Homer and Plato.

So, at least, Thelma thought, when, released from the bondage of London social life, she found herself once more at Errington Manor, then looking its loveliest, surrounded with a green girdle of oak and beech, and set off by the beauty of velvety lawns and terraces, and rose-gardens in full bloom. The depression from which she had suffered fell away from her completely—she grew light-hearted as a child, and flitted from room to room, singing to herself for pure gladness. Philip was with her all day now, save for a couple of hours in the forenoon which he devoted to letter-writing in connection with his Parliamentary aspirations,—and Philip was tender, adoring, and passionate as lovers may be, but as husbands seldom are. They took long walks together through the woods,—they often rambled across the fragrant fields to Anne Hathaway's

cottage, which was not very far away, and sitting down in some sequestered nook, Philip would pull from his pocket a volume of the immortal Plays, and read passages aloud in his fine mellow voice, while Thelma, making posies of the meadow flowers, listened entranced. Sometimes, when he was in a more business-like humour, he would bring out Cicero's Orations, and after pondering over them for a while would talk very grandly about the way in which he meant to speak in Parliament.

"They want dash and fire there," he said, "and these qualities must be united with good common sense. In addressing the House, you see, Thelma, one must rouse and interest the men—not bore them. You can't expect fellows to pass a Bill if you've made them long for their beds all the time you've been talking about it."

Thelma smiled and glanced over his shoulder at "Cicero's Orations."

"And do you wish to speak to them like Cicero, my boy?" she said gently. "But I do not think you will find that possible. Because when Cicero spoke it was in a different age, and to very different people—people who were glad to learn how to be wise and brave. But if you were Cicero himself, do you think you would be able to impress the English Parliament?"

"Why not, dear?" asked Errington with some fervour. "I believe that men, taken as men, *pur et simple*, are the same in all ages, and are open to

the same impressions. Why should not modern Englishmen be capable of receiving the same lofty ideas as the antique Romans, and acting upon them?"

"Ah, do not ask *me* why," said Thelma, with a plaintive little shake of her head—"for *I* cannot tell you! But remember how many members of Parliament we did meet in London—and where were their lofty ideas? Philip, had they any ideas at all, do you think? There was that very fat gentleman who is a brewer,— well, to hear him talk, would you not think all England was for the making of beer? And he does not care for the country unless it continues to consume his beer! It was to that very man I said something about *Hamlet*, and he told me he had no interest for such nonsense as Shakespeare and play-going—his time was taken up at the ''*Ouse*.' You see, he is a member of Parliament—yet it is evident he neither knows the language nor the literature of his country! And there must be many like him, otherwise so ignorant a person would not hold such a position—and for such men, what would be the use of a Cicero?"

Philip leaned back against the trunk of the tree under which they were sitting, and laughed.

"You may be right, Thelma,—I dare say you are. There's certainly too much beer represented in the House—I admit that. But, after all, trade is the great moving-spring of national prosperity,—

and it would hardly be fair to refuse seats to the very men who help to keep the country going."

"I do not see that," said Thelma gravely,—"if those men are ignorant, why should they have a share in so important a thing as Government? They may know all about beer, and wool, and iron,—but perhaps they can only judge what is good for themselves, not what is best for the whole country, with all its rich and poor. I do think that only the wisest scholars and most intelligent persons should be allowed to help in the ruling of a great nation."

"But the people choose their own rulers," remarked Errington reflectively.

"Ah, the poor people!" sighed Thelma. "They know so very little,—and they are taught so badly! I think they never do quite understand what they do want,—they are the same in all histories,—like little children, they get bewildered and frightened in any trouble, and the wisest heads are needed to think for them. It is, indeed, most cruel to make them puzzle out all difficulty for themselves!"

"What a little sage you are, my pet!" laughed Philip, taking her hand on which the marriage-ring and its accompanying diamond circlet glistened brilliantly in the warm sunlight. "Do you mean to go in for politics?"

She shook her head. "No, indeed! That is not woman's work at all. The only way in which

I think about such things, is that I feel the people cannot all be wise,—and that it seems a pity the wisest and greatest in the land should not be chosen to lead them rightly."

"And so, under the circumstances, you think it's no use my trying to *pose* as a Cicero?" asked her husband amusedly. She laughed—with a very tender cadence in her laughter.

"It would not be worth your while, my boy," she said. "You know I have often told you that I do not see any great distinction in being a member of Parliament at all. What will you do? You will talk to the fat brewer perhaps, and he will contradict you—then other people will get up and talk and contradict each other,—and so it will go on for days and days—meanwhile the country remains exactly as it was, neither better nor worse,—and all the talking does no good! It is better to be out of it,—here together, as we are to-day."

And she raised her dreamy blue eyes to the sheltering canopy of green leaves that overhung them—leaves thick-clustered and dewy, through which the dazzling sky peeped in radiant patches. Philip looked at her,—the rapt expression of her upward gaze,—the calm, untroubled sweetness of her fair face,—were such as might well have suited one of Raffaelle's divinest angels. His heart beat quickly—he drew closer to her, and put his arm round her.

"Your eyes are looking at the sky, Thelma," he whispered. "Do you know what that is? Heaven looking into heaven! And do you know which of the two heavens I prefer?" She smiled, and, turning, met his ardent gaze with one of equal passion and tenderness.

"Ah, you *do* know!" he went on, softly kissing the side of her slim white throat. "I thought you couldn't possibly make a mistake!" He rested his head against her shoulder, and after a minute or two of lazy comfort, he resumed. "You are not ambitious, my Thelma! You don't seem to care whether your husband distinguishes himself in the ''*Ouse*,' as our friend the brewer calls it, or not. In fact, I don't believe you care for anything save—love! Am I not right, my wife?"

A wave of rosy colour flushed her transparent skin, and her eyes filled with an earnest, almost pathetic languor.

"Surely of all things in the world," she said in a low tone,—"Love is best?"

To this he made prompt answer, though not in words—his lips conversed with hers, in that strange, sweet language which, though unwritten, is everywhere comprehensible,—and then they left their shady resting-place and sauntered homeward hand in hand through the warm fields fragrant with wild thyme and clover.

Many happy days passed thus with these lovers —for lovers they still were. Marriage had for

once fulfilled its real and sacred meaning—it had set Love free from restraint, and had opened all the gateways of the only earthly paradise human hearts shall ever know,—the paradise of perfect union and absolute sympathy with the one thing beloved on this side eternity.

The golden hours fled by all too rapidly,—and towards the close of August there came an interruption to their felicity. Courtesy had compelled Bruce-Errington and his wife to invite a few friends down to visit them at the Manor before the glory of the summer-time was past,—and first among the guests came Lord and Lady Winsleigh and their bright boy, Ernest. Her ladyship's maid, Louise Rénaud, of course, accompanied her ladyship,—and Briggs was also to the fore in the capacity of Lord Winsleigh's personal attendant. After these, George Lorimer arrived—he had avoided the Erringtons all the season,—but he could not very well refuse the pressing invitation now given him, without seeming churlish,—then came Beau Lovelace, for a few days only, as with the commencement of September he would be off as usual to his villa on the Lago di Como. Sir Francis Lennox, too, made his appearance frequently in a casual sort of way—he "ran down," to use his own expression, now and then, and made himself very agreeable, especially to men, by whom he was well liked for his invariable good-humour and extraordinary proficiency in all

sports and games of skill. Another welcome visitor was Pierre Duprèz, lively and sparkling as ever,—he came from Paris to pass a fortnight with his "cher Phil-eep," and make merriment for the whole party. His old admiration for Britta had by no means decreased,—he was fond of waylaying that demure little maiden on her various household errands, and giving her small posies of jessamine and other sweet-scented blossoms to wear just above the left-hand corner of her apron-bib, close to the place where the heart is supposed to be. Olaf Güldmar had been invited to the Manor at this period,—Errington wrote many urgent letters, and so did Thelma, entreating him to come,—for nothing would have pleased Sir Philip more than to have introduced the fine old Odin worshipper among his fashionable friends, and to have heard him bluntly and forcibly holding his own among them, putting their faint and languid ways of life to shame by his manly, honest, and vigorous utterance. But Güldmar had only just returned to the Altenfjord after nearly a year's absence, and his hands were too full of work for him to accept his son-in-law's invitation.

"The farm lands have a waste and dreary look," he wrote, "though I let them to a man who should verily have known how to till the soil trodden by his fathers—and as for the farm-house, 'twas like a hollow shell that has lain long on the

shore and become brown and brittle—for thou knowest no human creature has entered there since we departed. However, Valdemar Svensen and I, for sake of company, have resolved to dwell together in it, and truly we have nearly settled down to the peaceful contemplation of our past days,—so Philip, and thou, my child Thelma, trouble not concerning me. I am hale and hearty, the gods be thanked,—and may live on in hope to see you both next spring or summer-tide. Your happiness keeps this old man young—so grudge me not the news of your delights wherein I am myself delighted."

One familiar figure was missing from the Manor household,—that of Edward Neville. Since the night at the Brilliant, when he had left the theatre so suddenly, and gone home on the plea of illness, he had never been quite the same man. He looked years older—he was strangely nervous and timid—and he shrank away from Thelma as though he were some guilty or tainted creature. Surprised at this, she spoke to her husband about it,—but he, hurriedly, and with some embarrassment, advised her to "let him alone"—his "nerves were shaken"—his "health was feeble"—and that it would be kind on her part to refrain from noticing him or asking him questions. So she refrained—but Neville's behaviour puzzled her all the same. When they left town, he implored, almost piteously, to be allowed to remain behind,

—he could attend to Sir Philip's business so much better in London, he declared, and he had his way. Errington, usually fond of Neville's society, made no attempt whatever to persuade him against his will,—so he stayed in the half-shut-up house in Prince's Gate through all the summer heat, poring over parliamentary documents and pamphlets,—and Philip came up from the country once a fortnight to visit him, and transact any business that might require his personal attention.

On one of the last and hottest days in August, a grand garden-party was given at the Manor. All the county people were invited, and they came eagerly, though, before Thelma's social successes in London, they had been reluctant to meet her. Now, they put on their best clothes, and precipitated themselves into the Manor grounds like a flock of sheep seeking land on which to graze,—all wearing their sweetest propitiatory smirk—all gushing forth their admiration of "that *darling* Lady Errington"—all behaving themselves in the exceptionally funny manner that county people affect,—people who are considered somebodies in the small villages their big houses dominate,—but who, when brought to reside in London, become less than the minnows in a vast ocean. These good folks were not only anxious to *see* Lady Errington—they wanted to *say* they had seen her,—and that she had spoken to *them*, so that they might, in talking to their neighbours, mention it

in quite an easy, casual way, such as—"Oh, I was at Errington Manor the other day, and Lady Errington said to me——." Or—"Sir Philip is *such* a charming man! I was talking to his lovely wife, and he asked me——" etc., etc. Or—"You've no idea what large strawberries they grow at the Manor! Lady Errington showed me some that were just ripening—magnificent!" And so on. For in truth this *is* "a mad world, my masters,"—and there is no accounting for the inexpressibly small follies and mean toadyisms of the people in it.

Moreover, all the London guests who were visiting Thelma came in for a share of the county magnates' servile admiration. They found the Winsleighs "*so* distingué"—Master Ernest instantly became "that *dear* boy!"—Beau Lovelace was "so dreadfully clever, you know!"—and Pierre Dupréz "quite *too* delightful!"

The grounds looked very brilliant—pink-and-white marquees were dotted here and there on the smooth velvet lawns—bright flags waved from different quarters of the gardens, signals of tennis, archery, and dancing,—and the voluptuous waltz-music of a fine Hungarian band rose up and swayed in the air with the downward floating songs of the birds and the dash of fountains in full play. Girls in pretty light summer costumes made picturesque groups under the stately oaks and beeches,—gay laughter echoed from the leafy shrubberies, and stray couples were seen saunter-

ing meditatively through the rose-gardens, treading on the fallen scented petals, and apparently too much absorbed in each other to notice anything that was going on around them. Most of these were lovers, of course—intending lovers, if not declared ones,—in fact, Eros was very busy that day among the roses, and shot forth a great many arrows, aptly aimed, out of his exhaustless quiver.

Two persons there were, however,—man and woman,—who, walking in that same rose-avenue, did not seem, from their manner, to have much to do with the fair Greek god,—they were Lady Winsleigh and Sir Francis Lennox. Her ladyship looked exceedingly beautiful in her clinging dress of Madras lace, with a bunch of scarlet poppies at her breast and a wreath of the same vivid flowers in her picturesque Leghorn hat. She held a scarlet-lined parasol over her head, and from under the protecting shadow of this silken pavilion, her dark, lustrous eyes flashed disdainfully as she regarded her companion. He was biting an end of his brown moustache, and looked annoyed, yet lazily amused too.

"Upon my life, Clara," he observed, "you are really awfully down on a fellow, you know! One would think you never cared twopence about me!"

"Too high a figure!" retorted Lady Winsleigh, with a hard little laugh. "I never cared a brass farthing!"

He stopped short in his walk and stared at her.

"By Jove! you *are* cool!" he ejaculated. "Then what did you mean all the time?"

"What did *you* mean?" she asked defiantly.

He was silent. After a slight, uncomfortable pause, he shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"Don't let us have a scene!" he observed in a bantering tone. "Anything but that!"

"Scene!" she exclaimed indignantly. "Pray when have you had to complain of me on that score?"

"Well, don't let me have to complain now," he said coolly.

She surveyed him in silent scorn for a moment, and her full, crimson lips curled contemptuously.

"What a brute you are!" she muttered suddenly between her set pearly teeth.

"Thanks, awfully!" he answered, taking out a cigarette and lighting it leisurely. "You are really charmingly candid, Clara! Almost as frank as Lady Errington, only less polite!"

"I shall not learn politeness from *you*, at any rate," she said,—then altering her tone to one of studied indifference, she continued coldly, "What do you want of me? We've done with each other, as you know. I believe you wish to become gentleman-lacquey to Bruce-Errington's wife, and that you find it difficult to obtain the situation. Shall I give you a character?"

He flushed darkly, and his eyes glittered with an evil lustre.

"Gently, Clara! Draw it mild!" he said languidly. "Don't irritate me, or I *may* turn crusty! You know, if I chose, I could open Bruce-Errington's eyes rather more widely than you'd like with respect to the *devoted affection* you entertain for his beautiful wife." She winced a little at this observation—he saw it and laughed,—then resumed; "At present I'm really in the best of humours. The reason I wanted to speak to you alone for a minute or two was, that I'd something to say which might possibly please you. But perhaps you'd rather not hear it?"

She was silent. So was he. He watched her closely for a little—noting with complacency the indignant heaving of her breast and the flush on her cheeks,—signs of the strong repression she was putting upon her rising temper.

"Come, Clara, you may as well be amiable," he said. "I'm sure you'll be glad to know that the virtuous Philip is not immaculate after all. Won't it comfort you to think that he's nothing but a mortal man like the rest of us? . . . and that with a little patience your charms will most probably prevail with him as easily as they once did with me? Isn't that worth hearing?"

"I don't understand you," she replied curtly.

"Then you are very dense, my dear girl," he remarked smilingly. "Pardon me for saying so!

But I'll put it plainly and in as few words as possible. The moral Bruce-Errington, like a great many other 'moral' men I know, has gone in for Violet Vere,—and I dare say you understand what *that* means. In the simplest language, it means that he's tired of his domestic bliss and wants a change."

Lady Winsleigh stopped in her slow pacing along the gravel-walk, and raised her eyes steadily to her companion's face.

"Are you sure of this?" she asked.

"Positive!" replied Sir Francis, flicking the light ash off his cigarette delicately with his little finger. "When you wrote me that note about the Vere, I confess I had my suspicions. Since then they've been confirmed. I know for a fact that Errington has had several private interviews with Vi, and has also written her a good many letters. Some of the fellows in the green-room teaze her about her new conquest, and she grins and admits it. Oh, the whole thing's plain enough! Only last week, when he went up to town to see his man Neville on business he called on Vi at her own apartments in Arundel Street, Strand. She told me so herself—we're rather intimate, you know,—though of course she refused to mention the object of his visit. Honour among thieves!" and he smiled half mockingly.

Lady Winsleigh seemed absorbed, and walked on like one in a dream. Just then, a bend in the

avenue brought them in full view of the broad terrace in front of the Manor, where Thelma's graceful figure, in a close-fitting robe of white silk crêpe, was outlined clearly against the dazzling blue of the sky. Several people were grouped near her,—she seemed to be in animated conversation with some of them, and her face was radiant with smiles. Lady Winsleigh looked at her,—then said suddenly in a low voice—

"It will break her heart!"

Sir Francis assumed an air of polite surprise. "Pardon! Whose heart?"

She pointed slightly to the white figure on the terrace.

"Hers! Surely you must know that?"

He smiled. "Well—isn't that precisely what you desire, Clara? Though, for my part, I don't believe in the brittleness of hearts—they seem to me to be made of exceptionally tough material. However, if the fair Thelma's heart cracks ever so widely, I think I can undertake to mend it!"

Clara shrugged her shoulders. "You!" she exclaimed contemptuously.

He stroked his moustache with feline care and nicety.

"Yes—I! If not, I've studied women all my life for nothing!"

She broke into a low peal of mocking laughter—turned, and was about to leave him, when he detained her by a slight touch on her arm.

"Stop a bit!" he said in an impressive *sotto-voce.* "A bargain's a bargain all the world over. If I undertake to keep you cognizant of Bruce-Errington's little goings-on in London,—information which, I dare say, you can turn to good account,—you must do something for me. I ask very little. Speak of me to Lady Errington—make her think well of me,—flatter me as much as you used to do when we fancied ourselves terrifically in love with each other—(a good joke, wasn't it!)—and, above all, make her *trust* me! Do you understand?"

"As Red Riding-Hood trusted the Wolf and was eaten up for her innocence," observed Lady Winsleigh. "Very well! I'll do my best. As I said before, you want a character. I'm sure I hope you'll obtain the situation you so much desire! I can state that you made yourself fairly useful in your last place, and that you left because your wages were not high enough!"

And with another sarcastic laugh, she moved forward towards the terrace where Thelma stood,—Sir Francis followed at some little distance with no very pleasant expression on his features. A stealthy step approaching him from behind made him start nervously—it was Louise Rénaud, who, carrying a silver tray on which soda-water bottles and glasses made an agreeable clinking, tripped demurely past him without raising her eyes. She came directly out of the rose-garden,—and,

as she overtook her mistress on the lawn, that lady seemed surprised, and asked—

"Where have you been, Louise?"

"Miladi was willing that I should assist in the attendance to-day," replied Louise discreetly. "I have waited upon Milord Winsleigh and other gentlemen in the summer-house at the end of the rose-garden."

And with one furtive glance of her black bead-like eyes at Lady Winsleigh's face, she made a respectful sort of half-curtsy and went her way.

Later on in the afternoon, when it was nearing sunset, and all other amusements had given way to the delight of dancing on the springy green turf to the swinging music of the band,—Briggs, released for a time from the duties of assisting the waiters at the splendid refreshment-table (duties which were pleasantly lightened by the drinking of a bottle of champagne which he was careful to reserve for his own consumption), sauntered leisurely through the winding alleys and fragrant shrubberies which led to the most unromantic portion of the Manor grounds,—namely, the vegetable-garden. Here none of the butterflies of fashion found their way,—the suggestions offered by growing cabbages, turnips, beans, and plump, yellow-skinned marrows were too prosaic for society bantams who require refined surroundings in which to crow their assertive platitudes. Yet it was a peaceful nook—and there were household

odours of mint and thyme and sweet marjoram, which were pleasant to the soul of Briggs, and reminded him of roast goose on Christmas Day, with all its attendant succulent delicacies. He paced the path slowly,—the light of the sinking sun blazing gloriously on his plush breeches, silver cordons and tassels,—for he was in full-dress livery in honour of the fête, and looked exceedingly imposing. Now and then he glanced down at his calves with mild approval,—his silk stockings fitted them well, and they had a very neat and shapely appearance.

"I *'ave* developed," he murmured to himself. "There ain't a doubt about it! One week of country air, and I'm a different man;—the effecks of overwork 'ave disappeared. Flopsie won't know these legs of mine when I get back,—they've improved surprisingly." He stopped to survey a bed of carrots. "Plenty of Cressy there," he mused. "Cressy's a noble soup, and Flopsie makes it well,—a man might do wuss than marry Flopsie. She's a widder, and a *leetle* old—just a leetle old for me—but——" Here he sniffed delicately at a sprig of thyme he had gathered, and smiled consciously. Presently he perceived a small, plump, pretty figure approaching him, no other than Britta, looking particularly charming in a very smart cap, adorned with pink-ribbon bows, and a very elaborately frilled muslin apron. Briggs at once assumed his most elegant and con-

quering air, straightened himself to his full height and kissed his hand to her with much condescension. She laughed as she came up to him, and the dimples in her round cheeks appeared in full force.

"Well, Mr. Briggs," she said, "are you enjoying yourself?"

Briggs smiled down upon her benevolently. "I am!" he responded graciously. "I find the hair refreshing. And you, Miss Britta?"

"Oh, I'm very comfortable, thank you!" responded Britta demurely, edging a little away from his arm, which showed an unmistakable tendency to encircle her waist,—then glancing at a basket she held full of grapes, just cut from the hothouse, she continued, "These are for the supper-table. I must be quick, and take them to Mrs. Parton."

"Must you?" and Briggs asked this question with quite an unnecessary amount of tenderness, then resuming his dignity, he observed, "Mrs. Parton is a very worthy woman—an excellent 'ousekeeper. But she'll no doubt excuse you for lingering a little, Miss Britta—especially in *my* company."

Britta laughed again, showing her pretty little white teeth to the best advantage. "Do you think she will?" she said merrily. "Then I'll stop a minute, and if she scolds me I'll put the blame on you!"

Briggs played with his silver tassels and, leaning gracefully against a plum-tree, surveyed her with a critical eye.

"I was not able," he observed, "to see much of you in town. Our people were always a' visitin' each other, and yet our meetings were, as the poet says, 'few and far between.'"

Britta nodded indifferently, and perceiving a particularly ripe gooseberry on one of the bushes close to her, gathered it quickly and popped it between her rosy lips. Seeing another equally ripe, she offered it to Briggs, who accepted it and ate it slowly, though he had a misgiving that by so doing he was seriously compromising his dignity. He resumed his conversation.

"Since I've been down 'ere, I've 'ad more opportunity to observe you. I 'ope you will allow me to say I think very 'ighly of you." He waved his hand with the elegance of a Sir Charles Grandison. "Very 'ighly indeed! Your youth is most becoming to you! If you only 'ad a little more *chick*, there'd be nothing left to desire!"

"A little more—*what?*" asked Britta, opening her blue eyes very wide in puzzled amusement.

"*Chick!*" replied Briggs, with persistent persuasiveness. "*Chick*, Miss Britta, is a French word much used by the aristocracy. Coming from Norway, and 'avin' perhaps a very limited experience, you mayn't 'ave 'erd it—but eddicated people 'ere find it very convenient and expressive.

Chick means style,—*the* thing,—*the* go, *the* fashion. For example, everythink your lady wears, is *chick!*"

"Really!" said Britta, with a wondering and innocent air. "How funny! It doesn't sound like French, at all, Mr. Briggs,—it's more like English."

"Perhaps the Paris accent isn't familiar to you yet," remarked Briggs majestically. "Your stay in the gay metropolis was probably short. Now, I 'ave been there many times—ah, Paris, Paris!" he paused in a sort of ecstasy, then, with a side leer, continued—"You'd 'ardly believe 'ow wicked I am in Paris, Miss Britta! I am, indeed! It is something in the hair of the Bollyvards, I suppose! And the caffy life excites my nerves."

"Then you shouldn't go there," said Britta gravely, though her eyes twinkled with repressed fun. "It can't be good for you. And, oh! I'm so sorry, Mr. Briggs, to think that *you* are ever wicked!" And she laughed.

"It's not for long," explained Briggs, with a comically satisfied, yet penitent, look. "It is only a sort of breaking out,—a fit of 'igh spirits. Hall men are so at times! It's *chick* to run a little wild in Paris. But, Miss Britta, if *you* were with me I should never run wild!" Here his arm made another attempt to get round her waist—and again she skilfully, and with some show of anger, avoided it.

"Ah, you're very 'ard upon me," he then observed. "Very, very, 'ard! But I won't complain, my—my dear gal—one day you'll know me better!" He stopped and looked at her very intently. "Miss Britta," he said abruptly, "you've a great affection for your lady, 'aven't you?"

Instantly Britta's face flushed, and she was all attention.

"Yes, indeed!" she answered quickly. "Why do you ask, Mr. Briggs?"

Briggs rubbed his nose perplexedly. "It is not easy to explain," he said. "To run down my own employers wouldn't be in my line. But I've an idea that Clara—by which name I allude to my Lord Winsleigh's lady,—is up to mischief. She 'ates *your* lady, Miss Britta—'ates 'er like poison!"

"Hates her!" cried Britta in astonishment. "Oh, you must be mistaken, Mr. Briggs! She is as fond of her as she can be—almost like a sister to her!"

"Clara's a fine actress," murmured Briggs, more to himself than his companion. "She'd beat Violet Vere on 'er own ground." Raising his voice a little, he turned gallantly to Britta and relieved her of the basket she held.

"Hallow me!" he said. "We'll walk to the 'ouse together. On the way I'll explain—and you'll judge for yourself. The words of the immortal bard, whose county we are in, occur to me as *aprerpo*,—'There are more things in 'evin and

'erth, 'Oratio,—than even the most devoted do mestic can sometimes be aweer of.' "

And gently sauntering by Britta's side, Briggs began to converse in low and confidential tones,—she listened with strained and eager attention,—and she was soon receiving information that startled her and set her on the alert.

Talk of private detectives and secret service! Do private detectives ever discover so much as the servants of a man's own household?—servants who are aware of the smallest trifles,—who know the name and position of every visitor that comes and goes,—who easily learn to recognize the handwriting on every letter that arrives—who laugh and talk in their kitchens over things that their credulous masters and mistresses imagine are unknown to all the world save themselves,—who will judge the morals of a Duke, and tear the reputation of a Duchess to shreds, for the least, the most trifling error of conduct! If you can stand well with your servants, you can stand well with the whole world—if not—carry yourself as haughtily as you may—your pride will not last long, depend upon it!

Meanwhile, as Briggs and Britta strolled in the side paths of the shrubbery, the gay guests of the Manor were dancing on the lawn. Thelma did not dance,—she reclined in a low basket-chair, fanning herself,—George Lorimer lay stretched in lazy length at her feet, and near her stood her

husband, together with Beau Lovelace and Lord Winsleigh. At a little distance, under the shadow of a noble beech, sat Mrs. Rush-Marvelle and Mrs. Van Clupp in earnest conversation. It was to Mrs. Marvelle that the Van Clupps owed their invitation for this one day down to Errington Manor,—for Thelma herself was not partial to them. But she did not like to refuse Mrs. Marvelle's earnest entreaty that they should be asked,—and that good-natured, scheming lady having gained her point, straightway said to Marcia Van Clupp somewhat severely—

"Now, Marcia, this is your last chance. If you don't hook Masherville at the Errington fête, you'll lose him! You mark my words!"

Marcia had dutifully promised to do her best, and she was now having what she herself called "a good hard time of it." Lord Algy was in one of his most provokingly vacillating moods—moreover, he had a headache, and felt bilious. Therefore he would not dance—he would not play tennis—he did not understand archery—he was disinclined to sit in romantic shrubberies or summer-houses, as he had a nervous dread of spiders—so he rambled aimlessly about the grounds with his hands in his pockets, and perforce Marcia was compelled to ramble too. Once she tried what effect an opposite flirtation would have on his mind, so she coquetted desperately with a young country squire, whose breed of pigs was considered

the finest in England—but Masherville did not seem to mind it in the least. Nay, he looked rather relieved than otherwise, and Marcia, seeing this, grew more resolute than ever.

"I guess I'll pay him out for this!" she thought as she watched him feebly drinking soda-water for his headache. "He's a man that wants ruling, and ruled he shall be!"

And Mrs. Rush-Marvelle and Mrs. Van Clupp observed her manœuvres with maternal interest, while the cunning-faced, white-headed Van Clupp conversed condescendingly with Mr. Rush-Marvelle as being a nonentity of a man whom he could safely patronize.

As the glory of the sunset paled, and the delicate, warm hues of the summer twilight softened the landscape, the merriment of the brilliant assembly seemed to increase. As soon as it was dark, the grounds were to be illuminated by electricity, and dancing was to be continued indoors—the fine old picture-gallery being the place chosen for the purpose. Nothing that could add to the utmost entertainment of the guests had been forgotten, and Thelma, the fair mistress of these pleasant revels, noting with quiet eyes the evident enjoyment of all present, felt very happy and tranquil. She had exerted herself a good deal, and was now a little tired. Her eyes had a dreamy, far-off look, and she found her thoughts wandering now and then, away to the Altenfjord

—she almost fancied she could hear the sigh of the pines and the dash of the waves mingling in unison as they used to do when she sat at the old farm-house window and span, little dreaming then how her life would change—how all those familiar things would be swept away as though they had never been. She roused herself from this momentary reverie, and glancing down at the recumbent gentleman at her feet, touched his shoulder lightly with the edge of her fan.

"Why do you not dance, you very lazy Mr. Lorimer?" she asked, with a smile.

He turned up his fair, half-boyish face to hers and laughed.

"Dance! I! Good gracious! Such an exertion would kill me, Lady Errington—don't you know that? I am of a Sultan-like disposition—I shouldn't mind having slaves to dance for me if they did it well—but I should look on from the throne whereon I sat cross-legged,—and smoke my pipe in peace."

"Always the same!" she said lightly. "Are you never serious?"

His eyes darkened suddenly. "Sometimes. Awfully so! And in that condition I become a burden to myself and my friends."

"Never be serious!" interposed Beau Lovelace, "it really isn't worth while! Cultivate the humour of a Socrates, and reduce everything by means of close argument to its smallest stand-point,

and the world, life, and time are no more than a pinch of snuff for some great Titanic god to please his giant nose withal!"

"Your fame isn't worth much then, Beau, if we're to go by that line of argument," remarked Errington, with a laugh.

"Fame! By Jove! You don't suppose I'm such an arrant donkey as to set any store by fame!" cried Lovelace, a broad smile lighting up his face and eyes. "Why, because a few people read my books and are amused thereby,—and because the Press pats me graciously on the back, and says metaphorically, 'Well done, little 'un!' or words to that effect, am I to go crowing about the world as if I were the only literary chanticleer? My dear friend, have you read 'Esdras'? You will find there that a certain king of Persia wrote to one 'Rathumus, a story-writer.' No doubt he was famous in his day, but,—to travestie *Hamlet*, 'where be his stories now?' Learn, from the deep oblivion into which poor Rathumus's literary efforts have fallen, the utter mockery and uselessness of so-called *fame!*"

"But there must be a certain pleasure in it while you're alive to enjoy it," said Lord Winsleigh. "Surely you derive some little satisfaction from your celebrity, Mr. Lovelace?"

Beau broke into a laugh, mellow, musical, and hearty.

"A satisfaction shared with murderers, thieves,

divorced women, dynamiters, and other notorious people in general," he said. "They're all talked about—so am I. They all get written about—so do I. My biography is always being carefully compiled by newspaper authorities, to the delight of the reading public. Only the other day I learned for the first time that my father was a greengrocer, who went in for selling coals by the half-hundred and thereby made his fortune—my mother was an unsuccessful oyster-woman who failed ignominiously at Margate—moreover, I've a great many brothers and sisters of tender age whom I absolutely refuse to assist. I've got a wife somewhere, whom my literary success causes me to despise—and I have deserted children. I'm charmed with the accuracy of the newspapers—and I wouldn't contradict them for the world,—I find my biographies so original! They are the result of that celebrity which Winsleigh thinks enjoyable."

"But assertions of that kind are libels," said Errington. "You could prosecute."

"Too much trouble!" declared Beau. "Besides, five journals have disclosed the name of the town where I was born, and as they all contradict each other, and none of them are right, any contradiction on *my* part would be superfluous!"

They laughed,—and at that moment Lady Winsleigh joined them.

"Are you not catching cold, Thelma?" she

inquired sweetly. "Sir Philip, you ought to make her put on something warm,—I find the air growing chilly."

At that moment the ever-ready Sir Francis Lennox approached with a light woollen wrap he had found in the hall.

"Permit me!" he said gently, at the same time adroitly throwing it over Thelma's shoulders.

She coloured a little,—she did not care for his attention, but she could not very well ignore it without seeming to be discourteous. So she murmured, "Thank you!" and, rising from her chair, addressed Lady Winsleigh.

"If you feel cold, Clara, you will like some tea," she said. "Shall we go indoors, where it is ready?"

Lady Winsleigh assented with some eagerness, —and the two beautiful women—the one dark, the other fair—walked side by side across the lawn into the house, their arms round each other's waists as they went.

"Two queens—and yet not rivals?" half-queried Lovelace, as he watched them disappearing.

"Their thrones are secure!" returned Sir Philip gaily.

The others were silent. Lord Winsleigh's thoughts, whatever they were, deepened the lines of gravity on his face; and George Lorimer, as he got up from his couch on the grass, caught a

fleeting expression in the brown eyes of Sir Francis Lennox that struck him with a sense of unpleasantness. But he quickly dismissed the impression from his mind, and went to have a quiet smoke in the shrubbery.

CHAPTER VI.

"La rose du jardin, comme tu sais, dure peu, et la saison des roses est bien vite écoulée!"—SAADI.

THELMA took her friend Lady Winsleigh to her own boudoir, a room which had been the particular pride of Sir Philip's mother. The walls were decorated with panels of blue silk in which were woven flowers of gold and silver thread,—and the furniture, bought from an old palace in Milan, was of elaborately carved wood inlaid with ivory and silver. Here a *tête-à-tête* tea was served for the two ladies, both of whom were somewhat fatigued by the pleasures of the day. Lady Winsleigh declared she must have some rest, or she would be quite unequal to the gaieties of the approaching evening, and Thelma herself was not sorry to escape for a little from her duties as hostess,—so the two remained together for some time in earnest conversation, and Lady Winsleigh then and there confided to Thelma what she had heard reported concerning Sir Philip's intimate acquaintance with

the burlesque actress, Violet Vere. And they were both so long absent that, after a while, Errington began to miss his wife, and, growing impatient, went in search of her. He entered the boudoir, and, to his surprise, found Lady Winsleigh there quite alone.

"Where is Thelma?" he demanded.

"She seems not very well—a slight headache or something of that sort—and has gone to lie down," replied Lady Winsleigh, with a faint trace of embarrassment in her manner. "I think the heat has been too much for her."

"I'll go and see after her,"—and he turned promptly to leave the room.

"Sir Philip!" called Lady Winsleigh. He paused and looked back.

"Stay one moment," continued her ladyship softly. "I have been for a long time so very anxious to say something to you in private. Please let me speak now. You—you know"—here she cast down her lustrous eyes—"before you went to Norway I—I was very foolish——"

"Pray do not recall it," he said with kindly gravity. "*I* have forgotten it."

"That is so good of you!" and a flush of colour warmed her delicate cheeks. "For if you have forgotten, you have also forgiven?"

"Entirely!" answered Errington,—and touched by her plaintive, self-reproachful manner and trembling voice, he went up to her and took her

hands in his own. "Don't think of the past, Clara! Perhaps I also was to blame a little—I'm quite willing to think I was. Flirtation's a dangerous amusement at best." He paused as he saw two bright tears on her long, silky lashes, and in his heart felt a sort of remorse that he had ever permitted himself to think badly of her. "We are the best of friends now, Clara," he continued cheerfully, "and I hope we may always remain so. You can't imagine how glad I am that you love my Thelma!"

"Who would not love her!" sighed Lady Winsleigh gently, as Sir Philip released her hands from his warm clasp,—then raising her tearful eyes to his she added wistfully, "You must take great care of her, Philip—she is so sensitive,—I always fancy an unkind word would kill her."

"She'll never hear one from me!" he returned, with so tender and earnest a look on his face, that Lady Winsleigh's heart ached for jealousy. "I must really go and see how she is. She's been exerting herself too much to-day. Excuse me!" and with a courteous smile and bow he left the room with a hurried and eager step.

Alone, Lady Winsleigh smiled bitterly. "Men are all alike!" she said half aloud. "Who would think he was such a hypocrite? Fancy his dividing his affection between two such contrasts as Thelma and Violet Vere! However, there's no

accounting for tastes. As for man's fidelity, I wouldn't give a straw for it—and for his morality——!" She finished the sentence with a scornful laugh, and left the boudoir to return to the rest of the company.

Errington, meanwhile, knocked softly at the door of his wife's bedroom—and receiving no answer, turned the handle noiselessly and went in. Thelma lay on the bed, dressed as she was, her cheek resting on her hand, and her face partially hidden. Her husband approached on tiptoe, and lightly kissed her forehead. She did not stir,—she appeared to sleep profoundly.

"Poor girl!" he thought, "she's tired out, and no wonder, with all the bustle and racket of these people! A good thing if she can rest a little before the evening closes in."

And he stole quietly out of the room, and meeting Britta on the stairs told her on no account to let her mistress be disturbed till it was time for the illumination of the grounds. Britta promised, —Britta's eyes were red—one would almost have fancied she had been crying. But Thelma was not asleep—she had felt her husband's kiss,—her heart had beat as quickly as the wing of a caged wild bird at his warm touch,—and now he had gone she turned and pressed her lips passionately on the pillow where his hand had leaned. Then she rose languidly from the bed, and, walking slowly to the door, locked it against all comers.

Presently she began to pace the room up and down,—up and down,—her face was very white and weary, and every now and then a shuddering sigh broke from her lips.

"Can I believe it? Oh no!—I cannot—I will not!" she murmured. "There must be some mistake—Clara has heard wrongly." She sighed again. "Yet—if it is so,—he is not to blame—it is I—I who have failed to please him. Where—how have I failed?"

A pained, puzzled look filled her grave blue eyes, and she stopped in her walk to and fro.

"It cannot be true!" she said half aloud,—"it is altogether unlike him. Though Clara says—and she has known him so long!—Clara says he loved *her* once—long before he saw me—my poor Philip!—he must have suffered by that love!—perhaps that is why he thought life so wearisome when he first came to the Altenfjord—ah! the Altenfjord!"

A choking sob rose in her throat—but she repressed it. "I must try not to weary him," she continued softly—"I must have done so in some way, or he would not be tired. But as for what I have heard,—it is not for me to ask him questions. I would not have him think that I mistrust him. No—there is some fault in me—something he does not like, or he would never go to——" She broke off and stretched out her hands with a sort of wild appeal. "Oh, Philip!

my darling!" she exclaimed in a sobbing whisper. "I always knew I was not worthy of you—but I thought,—I hoped my love would make amends for all my short-comings!"

Tears rushed into her eyes, and she turned to a little arched recess, shaded by velvet curtains—her oratory—where stood an exquisite white marble statuette of the Virgin and Child. There she knelt for some minutes, her face hidden in her hands, and when she rose she was quite calm, though very pale. She freshened her face with cold water, rearranged her disordered hair,—and then went downstairs, thereby running into the arms of her husband who was coming up again to look, as he said, at his "Sleeping Beauty."

"And here she is!" he exclaimed joyously. "Have you rested enough, my pet?"

"Indeed, yes!" she answered gently. "I am ashamed to be so lazy. Have you wanted me, Philip?"

"I always want you," he declared. "I am never happy without you."

She smiled and sighed. "You say that to please me," she said half wistfully.

"I say it because it is true!" he asserted proudly, putting his arm round her waist and escorting her in this manner down the great staircase. "And you know it, you sweet witch! You're just in time to see the lighting up of the grounds. There'll be a good view from the

picture-gallery—lots of the people have gone in there—you'd better come too, for it's chilly outside."

She followed him obediently, and her reappearance among her guests was hailed with enthusiasm,—Lady Winsleigh being particularly effusive, almost too much so.

"Your headache has quite gone, dearest, hasn't it?" she inquired sweetly.

Thelma eyed her gravely. "I did not suffer from headache, Clara," she said. "I was a little tired, but I am quite rested now."

Lady Winsleigh bit her lips rather vexedly, but said no more, and at that moment exclamations of delight broke from all assembled at the brilliant scene that suddenly flashed upon their eyes. Electricity, that radiant sprite whose magic wand has lately been bent to the service of man, had in less than a minute played such dazzling pranks in the gardens that they resembled the fabled treasure-houses discovered by Aladdin. Every tree glittered with sparkling clusters of red, blue, and green light—every flower-bed was bordered with lines and circles of harmless flame, and the fountains tossed up tall columns of amber, rose, and amethyst spray against the soft blue darkness of the sky in which a lustrous golden moon had just risen. The brilliancy of the illuminations showed up several dark figures strolling in couples about the grounds—romantic persons

evidently who were not to be persuaded to come indoors, even for the music of the band which just then burst forth invitingly through the open windows of the picture-gallery.

Two of these pensive wanderers were Marcia Van Clupp and Lord Algernon Masherville,—and Lord Algy was in a curiously sentimental frame of mind, and weak withal, "*comme une petite queue d'agneau affligé.*" He had taken a good deal of soda and brandy for his bilious headache, and, physically, he was much better,—but mentally he was not quite his ordinary self. By this it must not be understood that he was at all unsteadied by the potency of his medicinal tipple—he was simply in a bland humour—that peculiar sort of humour which finds strange and mystic beauty in everything, and contemplates the meanest trifles with emotions of large benevolence. He was conversational too, and inclined to quote poetry—this sort of susceptibleness often affects gentlemen after they have had an excellent dinner flavoured with the finest Burgundy. Lord Algy was as mild, as tame, and as flabby as a sleeping jelly-fish,—and in this inoffensive, almost tender mood of his, Marcia pounced upon him. She looked ravishingly pretty in the moonlight with a white wrap thrown carelessly round her head and shoulders, and her bold, bird-like eyes sparkling with excitement (for who that knows the pleasure of sport, is not excited when the fox is nearly run to earth?), and

she stood with him beside one of the smaller illuminated fountains, raising her small white hand every now and then to catch some of the rainbow drops, and then with a laugh she would shake them off her little pearly nails into the air again. Poor Masherville could not help gazing at her with a lack-lustre admiration in his pale eyes,—and Marcia, calculating every move in her own shrewd mind, saw it. She turned her head away with a petulant yet coquettish movement.

"My patience!" she exclaimed; "yew *kin* stare! Yew'll know me again when yew see me, —say?"

"I should know you anywhere," declared Masherville, nervously fumbling with the string of his eye-glass. "It's impossible to forget *your* face, Miss Marcia!"

She was silent,—and kept that face turned from him so long that the gentle little lord was surprised. He approached her more closely and took her hand—the hand that had played with the drops in the fountain. It was such an astonishingly small hand—so very fragile-looking and tiny, that he was almost for putting up his eye-glass to survey it, as if it were a separate object in a museum. But the faintest pressure of the delicate fingers he held startled him, and sent the most curious thrill through his body—and when he spoke he was in such a flutter that he scarcely knew what he was saying.

"Miss—Miss Marcia!" he stammered, "have —have I said—anything to—to offend you?"

Very slowly, and with seeming reluctance, she turned her head towards him, and—oh, thou mischievous Puck, that sometimes takest upon thee the semblance of Eros, what skill is thine! . . . there were tears in her eyes—real tears—bright, large tears that welled up and fell through her long lashes in the most beautiful, touching, and becoming manner! "And," thought Marcia to herself, "if I don't fetch him now, I never will!" Lord Algy was quite frightened—his poor brain grew more and more bewildered.

"Why—Miss Marcia! I say! Look here!" he mumbled in his extremity, squeezing her little hand tighter and tighter. "What—what *have* I done! Good gracious! You—you really mustn't cry, you know—I say—look here! Marcia! I wouldn't vex you for the world!"

"Yew bet yew wouldn't!" said Marcia, with slow and nasal plaintiveness. "I like that! That's the way yew English talk. But yew kin hang round a girl a whole season and make all her folks think badly of her—and—and—break her heart—yes—that's so!" Here she dried her eyes with a filmy lace handkerchief. "But don't *yew* mind me! I kin bear it. I kin worry through!" And she drew herself up with dignified resignation—while Lord Algy stared wildly at her, his feeble mind in a whirl. Presently she

smiled most seductively, and looked up with her dark, tear-wet eyes to the moon.

"I guess it's a good night for lovers!" she said, sinking her ordinary tone to an almost sweet cadence. "But we're not of that sort, are we?"

The die was cast! She looked so charming—so irresistible, that Masherville lost all hold over his wits. Scarcely knowing what he did, he put his arm round her waist. Oh, what a warm, yielding waist! He drew her close to his breast, at the risk of breaking his most valuable eye-glass,—and felt his poor weak soul in a quiver of excitement at this novel and delicious sensation.

"We are—we are of that sort!" he declared courageously. "Why should you doubt it, Marcia?"

"I'll believe *yew* if *yew* say so," responded Marcia. "But I guess yew're only fooling me!"

"Fooling you!" Lord Algy was so surprised that he released her quite suddenly from his embrace—so suddenly that she was a little frightened. Was she to lose him, after all?

"Marcia," he continued mildly, yet with a certain manliness that did not ill become him. "I—I hope I am too much of—of a gentleman to —to '*fool*' any woman, least of all you, after I have, as you say, compromised you in society by my—my attentions. I—I have very little to offer you—but such as it is, is yours. In—in short,

Marcia, I—I will try to make you happy if you can—can care for me enough to—to—marry me!"

Eureka! The game was won! A vision of Masherville Park, Yorkshire, that "well-timbered and highly desirable residence," as the auctioneers would describe it, flitted before Marcia's eyes,—and, filled with triumph, she went straight into her lordly wooer's arms, and kissed him with thorough Transatlantic frankness. She was really grateful to him. Ever since she had come to England, she had plotted and schemed to become "my lady" with all the vigour of a purely republican soul,—and now at last, after hard fighting, she had won the prize for which her soul had yearned. She would in future belong to the English aristocracy—that aristocracy which her relatives in New York pretended to despise, yet openly flattered,—and with her arms round the trapped Masherville's neck, she foresaw the delight she would have in being toadied by them as far as toadyism could be made to go.

She is by no means presented to the reader as a favourable type of her nation—for, of course, every one knows there are plenty of sweet, unselfish, guileless American girls, who are absolutely incapable of such unblushing marriage-scheming as hers,—but what else could be expected from Marcia? Her grandfather, the navvy, had but recently become endowed with Pilgrim-Father Ancestry,—and her maternal uncle was a boastful

pork-dealer in Cincinnati. It was her bounden duty to ennoble the family somehow,—surely, if any one had a right to be ambitious, she was that one! And while proud dreams of her future passed through her brain, little Lord Algy quivered meekly under her kiss, and returned it with all the enthusiasm of which he was capable. One or two faint misgivings troubled him as to whether he had not been just a little too hasty in making a serious *bona fide* offer of marriage to the young lady by whose Pilgrim progenitors he was not deceived. He knew well enough what her antecedents were, and a faint shudder crossed him as he thought of the pork-dealing uncle, who would, by marriage, become *his* uncle also. He had long been proud of the fact that the house of Masherville had never, through the course of centuries, been associated, even in the remotest manner with trade—and now!——

"Yet, after all," he mused, "the Marquis of Londonderry openly advertises himself as a coal-merchant, and the brothers-in-law of the Princess Louise are in the wine trade and stock-broking business,—and all the old knightly blood of England is mingling itself by choice with that of the lowest commoners—what's the use of my remaining aloof, and refusing to go with the spirit of the age? Besides, Marcia loves me,—and it's pleasant to be loved!"

Poor Lord Algy! He certainly thought there

could be no question about Marcia's affection for him. He little dreamed that it was to his title and position she had become so deeply attached,—he could not guess that after he had married her there would be no more Lord Masherville worth mentioning—that that individual, once independent, would be entirely swallowed up and lost in the dashing personality of Lady Masherville, who would rule her husband as with a rod of iron.

He was happily ignorant of his future, and he walked in the gardens for some time with his arm round Marcia's waist, in a very placid and romantic frame of mind. By-and-by he escorted her into the house, where the dancing was in full swing—and she, with a sweet smile, bidding him wait for her in the refreshment-room, sought for and found her mother, who, as usual, was seated in a quiet corner with Mrs. Rush-Marvelle, talking scandal.

"Well?" exclaimed these two ladies, simultaneously and breathlessly.

Marcia's eyes twinkled. "Guess he came in as gently as a lamb!" she said.

They understood her. Mrs. Rush-Marvelle rose from her chair in her usual stately and expansive manner.

"I congratulate you, my dear!" kissing Marcia affectionately on both cheeks. "Bruce-Errington would have been a better match,—but,

under the circumstances, Masherville is really about the best thing you could do. You'll find him quite easy to manage!" This with an air as though she were recommending a quiet pony.

"That's so!" said Marcia carelessly, "I guess we'll pull together somehow. Mar-ma," to her mother—"yew kin turn on the news to all the folks yew meet—the more talk the better! I'm not partial to secrets!" And with a laugh, she turned away.

Then Mrs. Van Clupp laid her plump, diamond-ringed hand on that of her dear friend, Mrs. Marvelle.

"You have managed the whole thing beautifully," she said, with a grateful heave of her ample bosom. "Such a clever creature as you are!" She dropped her voice to a mysterious whisper. "You shall have that cheque to-morrow, my love!"

Mrs. Rush-Marvelle pressed her fingers cordially.

"Don't hurry yourself about it!"—she returned in the same confidential tone. "I dare say you'll want me to arrange the wedding and the 'crush' afterwards. I can wait till then."

"No, no! that's a separate affair," declared Mrs. Van Clupp. "I must insist on your taking the promised two hundred. You've been really so *very* energetic!"

"Well, I *have* worked rather hard," said

Mrs. Marvelle, with modest self-consciousness. "You see nowadays it's so difficult to secure suitable husbands for the girls who ought to have them. Men *are* such slippery creatures!"

She sighed—and Mrs. Van Clupp echoed the sigh,—and then these two ladies,—the nature of whose intimacy may now be understood by the discriminating reader,—went together to search out those of their friends and acquaintances who were among the guests that night, and to announce to them (in the strictest confidence, of course!) the delightful news of "dear Marcia's engagement." Thelma heard of it, and went at once to proffer her congratulations to Marcia in person.

"I hope you will be very, very happy!" she said simply, yet with such grave earnestness in her look and voice that the "Yankee gel" was touched to a certain softness and seriousness not at all usual with her, and became so winning and gentle to Lord Algy that he felt in the seventh heaven of delight with his new position as affianced lover to so charming a creature.

Meanwhile George Lorimer and Pierre Duprèz were chatting together in the library. It was very quiet there,—the goodly rows of books, the busts of poets and philosophers,—the large, placid features of the Pallas Athene crowning an antique pedestal,—the golden pipes of the organ gleaming through the shadows,—all these gave a solemn, almost sacred aspect to the room. The noise of

the dancing and festivity in the distant picture-gallery did not penetrate here, and Lorimer sate at the organ, drawing out a few plaintive strains from its keys as he talked.

"It's your fancy, Pierre," he said slowly. "Thelma may be a little tired to-day, perhaps—but I know she's perfectly happy."

"I think not so," returned Duprèz. "She has not the brightness—the angel look—*les yeux d'enfant*,—that we beheld in her at that far Norwegian Fjord. Britta is anxious for her."

Lorimer looked up, and smiled a little.

"Britta? It's always Britta with you, *mon cher!* One would think——" he paused and laughed.

"Think what you please!" exclaimed Duprèz, with a defiant snap of his fingers. "I would not give that little person for all the *grandes dames* here to-day! She is charming—and she is *true! Ma foi!*—to be true to any one is a virtue in this age! I tell you, my good boy, there is something sorrowful—heavy—on *la belle* Thelma's mind—and Britta, who sees her always, feels it—but she cannot speak. One thing I will tell you—it is a pity she is so fond of Miladi Winsleigh."

"Why?" asked Lorimer, with some eagerness.

"Because——" he stopped abruptly as a white figure suddenly appeared at the doorway, and a musical voice addressed them—

"Why, what are you both doing here, away

from everybody?" and Thelma smiled as she approached. "You are hermits, or you are lazy! People are going in to supper. Will you not come also?"

"*Ma foi!*" exclaimed Duprèz; "I had forgotten! I have promised your most charming mother, *cher* Lorimer, to take her in to this same supper. I must fly upon the wings of chivalry!"

And with a laugh, he hurried off, leaving Thelma and Lorimer alone together. She sank rather wearily into a chair near the organ, and looked at him.

"Play me something!" she said softly.

A strange thrill quivered through him as he met her eyes—the sweet, deep, earnest eyes of the woman he loved. For it was no use attempting to disguise it from himself—he loved her passionately, wildly, hopelessly; as he had loved her from the first.

Obedient to her wish, his fingers wandered over the organ-keys in a strain of solemn, weird, yet tender melancholy—the grand, rich notes pealed forth sobbingly—and she listened, her hands clasped idly in her lap. Presently he changed the theme to one of more heart-appealing passion—and a strange wild minor air, like the rushing of the wind across the mountains, began to make itself heard through the subdued rippling murmur of his improvised accompaniment. To his surprise and fear, she started up, pressing her hands against her ears.

"Not that—not that song, my friend!" she cried, almost imploringly. "Oh, it will break my heart! Oh, the Altenfjord!" And she gave way to a passion of weeping.

"Thelma! Thelma!" and poor Lorimer, rising from the organ, stood gazing at her in piteous dismay,—every nerve in his body wrung to anguish by the sound of her sobbing. A mad longing seized him to catch her in his arms,—to gather her and her sorrows, whatever they were, to his heart!—and he had much ado to restrain himself.

"Thelma," he presently said, in a gentle voice that trembled just a little, "Thelma, what is troubling you? You call me your brother—give me a brother's right to your confidence." He bent over her and took her hand. "I—I can't bear to see you cry like this! Tell me—what's the matter? Let me fetch Philip."

She looked up with wild wet eyes and quivering lips.

"Oh no—no!" she murmured, in a tone of entreaty and alarm. "Do not,—Philip must not know—I do wish him always to see me bright and cheerful—and—it is nothing! It is that I heard something which grieved me——"

"What was it?" asked Lorimer, remembering Duprèz's recent remarks.

"Oh, I would not tell you!" she said eagerly, drying her eyes and endeavouring to smile,

"because I am sure it was a mistake, and all wrong—and I was foolish to fancy that such a thing could be, even for a moment. But when one does not know the world, it seems cruel——"

"Thelma, what do you mean?" and George surveyed her in some perplexity. "If any one's been bothering or vexing you, just you tell Phil all about it. Don't have any secrets from him, —he'll soon put everything straight, whatever it is."

She shook her head slightly. "Ah, you do not understand!" she said pathetically, "how should you? Because you have not given your life away to any one, and it is all different with you. But when you do love—if you are at all like me,—you will be so anxious to always seem worthy of love—and you will hide all your griefs away from your beloved,—so that your constant presence shall not seem tiresome. And I would not for all the world trouble Philip with my silly fancies—because then he might grow more weary still——"

"*Weary!*" interrupted Lorimer, in an accent of emphatic surprise. "Why, you don't suppose Phil's tired of you, Thelma? That *is* nonsense indeed! He worships you! Who's been putting such notions into your head?"

She rose from her chair quite calm and very pale, and laid her two trembling hands in his.

"Ah, you also will mistake me," she said,

with touching sweetness, "like so many others who think me strange in my speech and manner. I am sorry I am not like other women,—but I cannot help it. What I do wish you to understand is that I never suppose anything against my Philip—he is the noblest and best of men! And you must promise not to tell him that I was so foolish as to cry just now because you played that old song I sang to you both so often in Norway—it was because I felt a little sad—but it was only a fancy,—and I would not have him troubled with such things. Will you promise?"

"But what has made you sad?" persisted Lorimer, still puzzled.

"Nothing—nothing indeed," she answered, with almost feverish earnestness. "You yourself are sometimes sad, and can you tell why?"

Lorimer certainly could have told why,—but he remained silent, and gently kissed the little hands he held.

"Then I mustn't tell Philip of your sadness?" he asked softly, at last. "But will you tell him yourself, Thelma? Depend upon it, it's much better to have no secrets from him. The least grief of yours would affect him more than the downfall of a kingdom. You know how dearly he loves you!"

"Yes—I know!" she answered, and her eyes brightened slowly. "And that is why I wish him always to see me happy!" She paused, and

then added in a lower tone, "I would rather die, my friend, than vex him for one hour!"

George still held her hands and looked wistfully in her face. He was about to speak again. when a cold, courteous voice interrupted them.

"Lady Errington, may I have the honour of taking you in to supper?"

It was Sir Francis Lennox. He had entered quite noiselessly—his footsteps making no sound on the thick velvet-pile carpet, and he stood quite close to Lorimer, who dropped Thelma's hands hastily and darted a suspicious glance at the intruder. But Sir Francis was the very picture of unconcerned and bland politeness, and offered Thelma his arm with the graceful ease of an accomplished courtier. She was perforce, compelled to accept it—and she was slightly confused, though she could not have told why.

"Sir Philip has been looking everywhere for you," continued Sir Francis amicably. "And for you also," he added, turning slightly to Lorimer. "I trust I've not abruptly broken off a pleasant *tête-à-tête?*"

Lorimer coloured hotly. "Not at all!" he said rather brusquely. "I've been strumming on the organ, and Lady Errington has been good enough to listen to me."

"You do not *strum*," said Thelma, with gentle reproach. "You play very beautifully."

"Ah! a charming accomplishment!" observed

Sir Francis, with his under-glance and covert smile, as they all three wended their way out of the library. "I regret I have never had time to devote myself to acquiring some knowledge of the arts. In music I am a positive ignoramus! I can hold my own best in the field."

"Yes, you're a great adept at hunting, Lennox," remarked Lorimer suddenly, with something sarcastic in his tone. "I suppose the quarry never escapes you?"

"Seldom!" returned Sir Francis coolly. "Indeed, I think I may say, never!"

And with that, he passed into the supper-room, elbowing a way for Thelma, till he succeeded in placing her near the head of the table, where she was soon busily occupied in entertaining her guests and listening to their chatter; and Lorimer, looking at her once or twice, saw, to his great relief, that all traces of her former agitation had disappeared, leaving her face fair and radiant as a spring morning.

END OF VOL. II.

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